



NATIONAL ARCHIVES ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

Oral History Interview

with

James Dent Walker

March 27, 1985

at

DAR Building

Washington, D.C.

Interviewed by Rodney A. Ross (National Archives employee)

Basic summary abstract prepared by Donnie Eichhorst (National Archives volunteer)

Editorial revision by Rodney A. Ross

James Dent Walker. Washington, D.C. March 27, 1985. Interviewed by
Rodney A. Ross

Walker, an internationally known genealogical consultant, is a retired
National Archives employee.

The interview traces Walker's career with the Federal Government from his
employment at the National Archives in 1944 at the age of sixteen through
his years of service until his retirement in 1979. During those years,
besides working at the National Archives, Walker worked for a year and a
half at the Treasury Department, spent four years in the Navy and worked
briefly as a Prudential Life Insurance salesman. As for Walker's career
with the National Archives the interview concentrates on his work with
what later became the Military Service Branch and on his genealogical
interests.

During the course of the interview Walker mentioned a number of persons
including G. Philip Bauer, Lorraine Branning, Victor Gondos, Jr.,
Alex Haley, Dallas Irvine, Mary Johnson, Al Meisel, Elmer Parker,
Louise Southwick and Frank P. Wilson. He also discussed the nature of
racism at the National Archives. Toward the end of the conversation
Walker discussed some of the genealogically-oriented organizations with
which he has been affiliated. He also candidly discussed the attitude
of the National Archives toward genealogists and genealogy.

The interview, approximately an hour and twenty minutes in length, was
conducted at the headquarters of the Daughters of the American Revolution
(DAR).

The audio sound on the second side of the 90-minute cassette is for the
most part of acceptable quality. So, too, are portions of the first side.
The last ten minutes of the first side of the tape illustrate recording
"bleed through".

Abstract of interview with James D. Walker in Washington, D.C., on March 27, 1985.
Interviewer: Rodney A. Ross
Tape length: Most of both sides of one 90-minute cassette

SIDE 1

QUESTION: Background?

ANSWER: Walker was born in Washington, D.C., on July 9, 1928. He came to the Archives in the middle of his high school years, for during World War II the Archives employed people as young as sixteen to fill job vacancies. Prior to that, all of his job experiences had been after school or during the summer: soda jerk, helping a fishmonger, working in a floral shop and working in a "5 and 10".

QUESTION: Do you have memories of the Old Central Market?

ANSWER: No. Walker did, however, remember work on the statuary for the Federal Trade Commission building and for work on the National Gallery. He had no memories of construction of either the National Archives building or the Federal Trade Commission building. The rest of his family had memories of the Old Central Market: his grandfather shopped there on a regular basis.

QUESTION: What did you do when you came to the Archives?

ANSWER: Walker came to the Archives "as the archival lone messenger." Then the position was under the Office of Transportation, or some such title. A Mr. Thompson was the supervisor. The office included the drivers, the laborers and Walker as messenger. That was the whole staff.

QUESTION: Was it an all-black staff?

ANSWER: No. Thompson was white; the labor staff was mixed.

QUESTION: I presume that organizationally it would have all been under "Pop" Stiles (sp?)?

ANSWER: No, under Frank P. Wilson who was then head of what then was comparable to the procurement division in charge of office supplies. When GSA was created, that office was transferred to 7th and D streets.

QUESTION/ANSWER: Discussion as to whether Solon Buck was Archivist when Walker joined the staff.

ANSWER: Buck was Archivist when Walker first joined the Archives staff. When Walker returned for his second stint of employment at the Archives, Wayne Grover was Archivist.

QUESTION: Buck had a reputation of being involved in everything and with everyone. Did he involve himself with messengers?

ANSWER: No. In fact, Walker couldn't recall knowing any of the administrative officers during those first two years, except by reputation.

QUESTION: You mentioned that you came back?

ANSWER: Walker began work at the Archives in 1944. He was "riffed" in February 1946 by returning veterans. He went to the Treasury Department and worked there for a year and a half. He resigned that position and spent four years in the Navy. When Walker was discharged, contrary to his better judgment he agreed to come back to the National Archives.

QUESTION: Were the post-World War II "rifs" extremely traumatic for the Archives as a whole or did they only hit a few select individuals?

ANSWER: It was an overall shake-up for the Archives. Many people on the Archives staff, like Theodore Schellenberg, during the war had left to work with was agencies; a lot went off to the war as well. When the veterans returned, others in the positions were "riffed."

QUESTION: Were your experiences with the Navy with all-black battalions.

ANSWER: No, integration had occurred. Walker was never with a unit in which blacks were a majority; he was always in a rank minority. In one unit there were 199 men of whom only seven were black.

QUESTION: What did you do in the Navy?

ANSWER: Walker was a surveyor, but he did everything but survey. In a year and a half on Guam he worked in the engineering office of the Naval Air Station in Orote. That base was closed by the Navy in 1948 at which time during the closing Walker became everything, even the commanding officer, as a seaman. When Walker left the Navy he was the highest ranking enlisted man -- surveyor -- who had "come up from the bottom of the heap." As far as overall Navy classification, based on rank, he was the fifth highest surveyor in the Navy.

QUESTION: Did you go to Dunbar High School?

ANSWER: Walker went to Dunbar for one year, to Armstrong for a year and to Cardoza for two years?

QUESTION: From where did you graduate?

ANSWER: Walker didn't graduate from high school. He took a high school equivalency exam and qualified for college on that basis.

QUESTION: Did you go on to college?

ANSWER: Walker spent several years going part-time to George Washington and to the USDA Graduate School. He has no degree.

QUESTION: Did you ever take Ernst Posner's course at the American University?

ANSWER: No, but Walker took the NARS rendition of that course in the late 1950's. It was a training course for the entire Archives staff. It was at that time that the grade levels for archivists were restructured. Archivists were put on a 5 - 7 - 9 training schedule. At the same time a training course for archives technicians was instituted which was a modified version of the Posner course.

QUESTION: Who was the instructor?

ANSWER: Frank Evans. Frosty Williams was also involved.

QUESTION: You returned to the Archives in the late 1940's?

ANSWER: No. Walker returned to the Archives in October 1951.

QUESTION: In what capacity?

ANSWER: Walker returned as one of the messengers in the Central Reference Division, the position he had when he left.

When Walker first came to the Archives he worked as the "lone messenger." Then he worked in preservation and then with the Printing and Processing Division. The Archives had its own printing plant on the ground floor of the Archives in what are now rooms G5 and G6. From there he went to the Central Reference Division.

QUESTION: So this was in the first couple of years?

ANSWER: Yes, the first two years.

QUESTION: When you returned to the Archives what did you do specifically with the Central Reference Division?

ANSWER: (inaudible)

QUESTION: For both Census and military claims did you actually pull the records yourself?

ANSWER: No. (inaudible)

QUESTION: Did you do any work in the arranging of materials?

ANSWER: No. (inaudible)

QUESTION: During that early period did you have much contact with researchers? Did they ask how to go about finding their ancestors?

ANSWER: Walker responded that he had had contact with researchers. (inaudible)

QUESTION: Did researchers use microfilm copies?

ANSWER: No. The National Archives used no microfilm at that time.

QUESTION: Can you continue on with the progression of your career at the National Archives?

ANSWER: When Walker returned to the National Archives in 1951 he worked in the Central Reference Division for about a year and a half. Then he transferred to the Industrial Records Branch under Dr. Paul Lewinson. (inaudible) His job there was useful. (inaudible) When he worked there, the other section, labor and transportation, had been combined together. (inaudible) In time Walker ended up being promoted.

That was an interesting story. Walker was called into Victor Gondos' office one day and told that Dr. Phil Bauer was about to descend on the office with a visitor who was interested in the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) records.

Just six months prior to that time by order of the Archivist, each archivist on the staff was given a number of record groups as that person's personal responsibility. Meyer Fishbein who had been given responsibility for FCC

records had other jobs including accessioning and disposing of World War II agency records. Fishbein was occupied and knew nothing about FCC records, nor did Gondos. Thus Walker was assigned the task of showing Dr. Bauer and his guest the FCC records -- where they were located, how they were arranged, etc. What happened made Walker so mad he "was ready to ring Victor Gondos' neck."

When Dr. Bauer appeared with his friend, Bauer said he'd go to see the records, too. The more questions were asked, the more Walker demonstrated his knowledge of the records. Finally the visitor asked where was Docket #1. The visitor went through that docket item by item. When the interview was over the visitor thanked Walker and said each question had been answered to the visitor's complete satisfaction. The visitor commended Walker on his knowledge of the records.

The visitor told Walker that he was the person who created Docket #1, and the person who ramrodded FCC legislation through Congress, and the first head of the FCC. Only later did Walker learn the visitor was the President of AT&T.

The upshot was that a vacancy occurred in Dallas Irvine's military division within the Old Army Records Branch. Walker was called for an interview. Irvine had the worst reputation as an absolute tyrant; nobody wanted to work with him. During the interview Irvine told Walker that never before had Bauer endorsed anyone, but that Walker was the first person. Irvine offered Walker a position which was a grade higher than what Walker held in the Industrial Records Branch.

QUESTION: As an archivist or a technician?

ANSWER: Technician. (inaudible) Grade 10.

Walker agreed to take the position, not knowing this would cause all kinds of problems. The staff rebelled and filed a formal protest because all of them held degrees and Walker didn't. Irvine defenede Walker's appointment.

When Walker went into his new position, he felt since the Archives thought enough of him to promote him to a section chief position it was incumbent upon Walker to learn the records as thoroughly as he could. This Walker managed to do. This was Walker's first supervisory position. He vowed that he'd never hold a supervisory position for which a subordinate would have more knowledge of an operation than he did. He spent a great deal of time learning those records.

QUESTION: Was this as assistant branch chief?

ANSWER: Assistant section chief. Eventually Walker took over the unit, which was transferred to Central Reference. It is now known as the Military Service Branch. Walker's staff grew from 5 to 80.

QUESTION: 80?

ANSWER: 80 people at one time.

QUESTION: Can you explain what the record groups were, and how the staff happened to grow that large?

ANSWER: Walker said there were two things to keep in mind. This was a unique section at that time. It was before some of the major changes had occurred in administrative responsibility. This office was responsible for handling and processing all requests for service in the U.S. Army, regardless of the nature of the request. It could be for a service record of an individual. It could be for a biography of a general. The section was getting an average of 3,000 letters a month. Before Walker left it was getting more than 3,000 letters a week.

The record groups for which the section were all the records of the U.S. Army -- every office, every branch, every division. The section was responsible for any request that could be considered a biographical request of military service.

Richard Wood's branch handled only requests of a historical nature. If it was on an individual, no matter how detailed, it was Walker's unit's responsibility. Therefore Walker learned the records of the War Department, from the Secretary of War down to its smallest office, including the Adjutant General, Quartermaster General, Ordinance Office, Engineering Office, all the Confederate records: everything relating to military service from 1775 until the declaration of war in 1917. For a while Walker's responsibilities even included World War I records, but that was short-lived.

The Archives at that time had a system of archives specialists, one of whom was Elmer O. Parker, who was in charge of Confederate records. Parker "did his damndest" to prevent Walker from learning anything about Confederate records. Walker, however, had an opportunity to prove to Parker at a later date that he had learned Confederate records as well as Parker did.

This came about as a kind of fluke. After Walker had been in that division for about three years one of his black employees filed a discrimination suit against him. Walker was transferred to work under Victor Gondos who was then head of the Old Army Branch.

Richard Wood had become director of the Vermont Historical Society.

Elmer Parker had moved to chief of reference in that branch. Parker was told to give Walker reference correspondence. For the first month or so Parker hand-selected correspondence Walker was to handle -- the easiest letters to handle, and nothing relating to Confederate records. One day Walker caught Parker at a bad moment. Parker was so rushed he gave Walker the pile and told him to pick his own. Walker took every difficult one that was in the pile. At that time Parker was checking everything that Walker did. Parker was never able to find any error in Walker's work.

Victor Gondos practically never said a congratulatory word to Walker during the whole time Walker worked for Gondos.

QUESTION: Was that typical of Gondos?

ANSWER: "The one and only Victor Gondos."

Anyway, Gondos let the word slip out six months later that Walker had answered more correspondence in a shorter period of time than anyone had ever done in the history of the branch. Walker thought he was there for six or eight months.

Walker went on to describe Gondos "as quite a character," who tried to prevent the promotion of minorities -- women, blacks, Hispanics.

QUESTION: Describe racism at the National Archives.

ANSWER: It existed in many different forms. It varied in degree from person to person. Problems came about from both majority and minority.

Walker described his relationship with the National Archives as one of the most pleasant experiences in his life, even working under Victor Gondos. One time Gondos held up a promotion for Walker for six months, even though it had been ordered by Dallas Irvine. The only way Gondos finally concurred was that Irvine appeared in Gondos' office one morning and said he wanted Walker's promotion by noon.

Walker found that certain people felt that they would never be promoted, or never be given credit if they would do something, because they were black. Others were hostile in their own attitudes so as to lessen their chances at promotion.

"Yes, there was quite a bit of prejudice there," remarked Walker. He added that it lessened as time went on. The original appointees to the Archives, those that came in the 1930's, were extremely prejudiced. Walker arrived after R.D.W. Connor had left so he never experienced, what he was told, was a very bad period in the Archives. When Walker came aboard in 1944 there were some vestiges of that 1930's administration still hanging around, being fostered primarily by those people from the South like Frank P. Wilson and a few others who did their best to keep blacks from being promoted. They also had the same amount of prejudice against poor whites.

There were some employees, the people who were the black professional archivists, who never felt they were given fair treatment in promotion consideration.

Walker also told that he was counseled by a black employee when Walker first came onboard and told not to work too hard because Walker would never be promoted -- he'd never get above a "5". Less than ten years later Walker was able to turn around and offer that person a job.

Walker stated that he considered his experiences to be very unique from the standpoint, first of all, that he did not have a degree. When Walker left the Archives he was one of three employees in the entire agency that held jobs of "grade 12 or above" who didn't have degrees. Walker's personal philosophy had always been never to consider or to allow prejudice to intervene in his relationships with people. That may have been the key to his success. He did not allow adverse situations to dictate his conduct or actions.

QUESTION: Can we continue with the progression of your career?

ANSWER: Walker took over as supervisor of the Military Service Section after Louise Southwick left and moved to Europe. Walker remained as head of that section until 1956 or 1957 when he left the Archives again to become a salesman for the Prudential Life Insurance Company.

QUESTION: Why did you decide to leave?

ANSWER: Walker's response was in reference to why he left the Archives for the third time in 1979. At that time Walker had 22 years of Federal service and he was less than 50 years old.

When Walker left in the late 1950's he wanted to find out what do with his life. He left, and found the experience "to be a horrible one."

The fellow Walker had recommended for his former job, whom Walker had considered the best candidate for it, hadn't worked out. Walker was called and asked if he'd like to come back. Walker agreed to do so.

Walker returned to his old job. The fellow who held that job was transferred to another position and finally left the agency and became a records officer with the Bureau of the Budget. This was a position both Walker and the other fellow had been considered for. It was left to the Archivist to decide which one of the two of them should get the job. The Bureau of the Budget people had wanted both candidates and planned to make them co-equals.

The Archives said Budget could have one, but not both. Walker was promoted in the Archives; the other person left to go to the job in Budget. Walker remained with his Archives job which became a part of Central Reference.

Walker attended an institute for genealogical research. Walker was called upon to give a lecture on military records. Eventually he gave lectures on various subjects.

After a point with military reference Walker realized he needed a change. He realized this when he found that he was sitting at his desk and was answering letters as fast as he could open them without having to leave his seat.

Walker asked for a transfer. A position of research consultant had been created about two years before. One of the positions had been vacated. Walker was given the position.

QUESTION: The Archives hadn't had research consultants prior to the 1950's?

ANSWER: This was the late 1960's. No, the archivists and technicians of the Central Reference Division were the initial contacts for researchers. They were the ones who issued research cards, asked the questions, etc. Each branch operated its own research room.

Mary Johnson was the chief consultant. The staff was only three people. Walker went into that office as one of the consultants. He continued to work with genealogical research. He eventually came to direct genealogical research when the National Archives took over the Institute of Genealogical Research from American University.

In 1977 the institute was taken from the Central Reference Division and placed in the Office of Education. Walker went down to Al Meisel's office to discuss heading genealogical programs at the National Archives. "Stupidly" Walker agreed to make the change. His relationship was with Al Meisel and Meisel's assistant, Lorraine Branning.

Walker had an agreement on a research trip in beginning to implement an outreach program for the National Archives. Walker had two trips lined up, at least one of them to Salt Lake City. Just before he was to leave he found Branning had cancelled his trip.

(The brief bit of the remainder of this side of the tape is first garbled and then blank. During the interview Walker indicated that the abrupt cancellation led to his decision that he wanted nothing more to do with the Office of Education. The upshot was that the Archives moved Walker back to his old unit in dealing with military reference questions.)

SIDE 2

ANSWER: Walker met Alex Haley around 1974, a few years before Roots came out. Haley phoned Walker and asked Walker to meet with him in New York to fill him and his staff in on the rudiments of genealogy. The upshot was that Walker was hired as a consultant to the Kunte Kinte Foundation, which was a Carnegie-funded project which Haley was heading -- about three years prior to the publication of Roots.

QUESTION: So he had been working at the ARchives for close to ten years before the two of you met?

ANSWER: Walker wasn't sure to what extent Haley had actually done research at the Archives. Walker was there when he came for his first visit. Walker may even have seen him. Haley's staff, the Kunte Kinte Foundation staff, made extensive use of the Archives.

Roots created chaos for the National Archives, but it was not the first instance of public clamor for genealogical data. Walker pointed out he had mentioned earlier on the tape that his staff on the Military Service Section had grown to 80. That was a direct result of an interview Victor Gondos gave in the late 1950's with American Weekly Magazine on Civil War records in the National Archives. The interview filled five or six pages. Never during that article did Gondos say that the National Archives had a form for requesting such materials.

The result was that at the end of the first week the Archives had received 700 requests, the second week an additional 1800 requests, the third week an additional 3,000 requests. These numbers kept growing and growing. The Archives had to hire additional staff to take care of that flood.

When Roots came out in 1976, the Archives was prepared for an influx of researchers, but nothing like what actually occurred. The Archives had standing-room only for several months after that. Prior to Roots the microfilm reading room had about 200 researchers a week. The researcher figure jumped to 200 - 400 per day. After six months the number died down, only to repeat itself after the TV series.

QUESTION: What was the Kunte Kinte Foundation and does it still function?

ANSWER: It is not still functioning. It was a three-pronged effort by Alex Haley to assess the materials available in the United States and elsewhere relating to African history, Afro-American history and Afro-American family history. There probably was a fourth division because there was an extensive oral interview program conducted by the staff. The Foundation was funded by Carnegie. There were workshops; people were involved all across the nation. None of the information collected was deposited in a single place; it was retained by the people who headed those places.

QUESTION: Are you active with the Afro-American Historical and Genealogical Society?

ANSWER: Walker pointed out he was the founder of that organization.

QUESTION: Could you describe what it does?

ANSWER: The Afro-American Historical and Genealogical Society was founded in 1977 for the purpose of promoting interest in Afro-American history and Afro-American genealogy. It is an integrated organization and always has been so since the beginning. Its purpose is to encourage people to get involved. It has a journal. It had had a newsletter, which at the time of the interview was about to be re-issued again. The journal had been well received. A forthcoming issue of the journal was about to come out with all the papers given at a Blacks in New Netherlands Conference in Albany in 1984.

The organization continues to grow. There are quarterly meetings at the National Archives. The organization holds its annual two-day seminar in September.

QUESTION: Where does your society fit in with the Society for the Study of Afro-American Life and Culture?

ANSWER: There is no relationship though a number of people belong to both. It happened that Walker founded his society at a time when the Society for the Study of Afro-American Life and Culture had sought an NEH grant to create a genealogical program. That grant was not funded. Walker acted because no one else was willing to take on the responsibility of trying to create such an organization.

QUESTION: Is your society largely a one-person operation?

ANSWER: The society has an officer structure. Although Walker was the first president, there had been two since then. Walker was then serving as treasurer, but after 1986 he didn't expect to hold another administrative position in the organization. Walker tried to involve as many people as he could. There was a nucleus of people who led the organization.

QUESTION: In continuing with your career at the Archives, did you go back to military records?

ANSWER: Yes. In 1979 Walker went back and remained there from February until August of that year when he retired -- or was thrown out. Walker wasn't prepared to retire. He had no intention to do so. He was only 51 years old. But, the opportunity was there for him to do so. He was very unhappy with his reassignment. He was very unhappy to be in the agency and watch genealogical programs flounder which he had created and built-up. Also, he felt his division chief had a dislike that Walker had been reassigned to that office without the division chief's agreement. While Walker went back to that office and performed the function of an archivist -- performing research, consulting and answering correspondence -- and he got on well with the staff, he didn't feel like he wished to continue working in that office.

QUESTION: Were you an archivist at this time?

ANSWER: No, Walker was an archives specialist. When he was promoted to a GS-12, he left the technicians' level. By this time the qualifications for archivist had reached the minimum requirement of a master's degree. He didn't qualify, although he had performed all of the functions of a professional archivist at the National Archives -- arrangement, description, preparation of publications, etc. He had reached a research consultant's position, but he had never held the position of archivist.

QUESTION: So you decided to retire?

ANSWER: By this time Walker had more than a year's commitment of lectures. He had a desire to do research topics. He felt he could live comfortably doing professional genealogical research and continuing his lectures.

QUESTION: We're now in the DAR building. Are you tied in with the mainline genealogical groups either in consulting or in active cooperation?

ANSWER: Not really, although Walker is a fellow of the National Genealogical Society and maintains personal relationships with the Federation of Genealogical Societies and the National Genealogical Society. He is not at all involved with the group who are Friends of the National Archives who collect funds from across the country for genealogical purposes. His work with the DAR keeps him in touch with such groups. He was then president of the new D.C. Genealogical Society.

QUESTION: Marian Anderson had a relationship with the DAR. You have a relationship with the DAR. Any comment?

ANSWER: Walker had a very peculiar relationship with the DAR, primarily because so many members had used the National Archives. In 1975 or 1976 People magazine interviewed Walker about his genealogical relationships. The interviewer wanted to include a story on the DAR and to include a photograph of Walker in the DAR building, a photograph of Walker and some of the national DAR officers. The DAR officers agreed. Walker was photographed in the DAR library with the president-general and about five other national officers. That photograph acquired for Walker a kind of papal blessing.

Walker's relationship with the DAR improved from that point on. He has been the only person in the history of the DAR to have been invited more than two times to address the DAR in Congress. He has done that on three or four different times. Since the People interview he's been invited annually to attend the opening of the DAR Congress.

In 1984 as a result of the suit brought against the DAR by Ferguson, Walker was asked to take on a project of compiling a list of minorities who served in the American Revolution. It was happenstance that Walker and his wife were about to take off for New England for the very same topic, a decision on their part based on congressional enactment in 1984 dedicating 1985 for the commemoration of Afro-American participation in the American Revolution. Given Walker's background he was the logical person to undertake compiling such a list. His contract was for a year, but probably the contract would be extended to a second year.

QUESTION: What's the proper role of archivist vis-a-vis researcher, especially in doing genealogy?

ANSWER: Walker indicated he wanted to answer that question by giving some historical background. When Walker went to work in the Central Reference Division, the National Archives staff, with maybe one or two exceptions, "considered genealogical research to be akin to sin." They were "very hostile, very bitter, and were very reluctant to serve the genealogical public." This is the reason for the great deal of hostility which existed between genealogists who used the Central Reference Room and the National Archives staff when Walker first joined the Archives.

Walker cited his being credited with having built the National Archives' reputation in the minds of the public that the National Archives should be sought for genealogical research. This occurred because of Walker's assignment to the Military Service Section and because of his lectures in the Institute of Genealogical Research. As it was acknowledged that Walker was an expert on military service records, he began to lecture on the subject across the country. He'd then be confronted about other resources in the National Archives. Eventually Walker became extensively knowledgeable about the other holdings of the Archives in relationship to their genealogical potential.

During Walker's tenure as "the genealogist for the National Archives" -- a position the institution never mentioned Walker held -- and even before that when he was still with the Central Reference Division and lecturing on National Archives sources, the staff changed. The older archivists retired. The new archivists were a younger group who had had exposure to genealogical issues. This group began to feed Walker information about valuable sources they had found in the Archives.

In answer to the interviewer's question, Walker responded that there was a two-pronged responsibility. First of all, the National Archives was derelict in its role in seeking to identify in its holdings and to report materials which could be used by genealogists and local historians, with Walker always lumping the two groups together. Walker made that statement in spite of the fact the National Archives had twice issued a guide to genealogical records, for in neither case was the publication inclusive of the majority of the known resource materials available at the National Archives.

QUESTION: Even the 1982 Guide to Genealogical Research in the National Archives?

ANSWER: Yes. Walker characterized this work as "incorrect." He added that he was initially given the job of compiling such a guide, but he refused because of the hostility of the branch chief for making their resources known for the guide. Walker claimed these people still occupied major administrative positions and as such would still be able to exclude major resources of the National Archives in any subsequent genealogical publication because of the work that would generate.

QUESTION: What kind of things do you have in mind?

ANSWER: One of the underdescribed major series of records of value for genealogical research are the Government Land Office records. This was the result of the unwillingness of the then-chief of that branch to allow the staff to prepare information for inclusion in that guide.

Land records are described in that guide. They're described in a lot greater detail than the division chief wanted them described. But, it does not include even the simplest description of some of the valuable resources that are there that probably lack indexing or other kinds of finding aids which would make them useful.

That's no reason not to describe the records. First of all, genealogists today are not the same breed of people they were forty years ago. Those were "little old ladies in tennis shoes, literally," who were over 65 years of age who had intelligence, but not a high degree of education, even though many were college graduates.

The genealogist of today is a highly sophisticated individual whose occupational skills range from Justice of the Supreme Court down. One day researchers in the Central Reference Room included a Supreme Court Justice, the Attorney General and the Speaker of the House -- to the great concern of the archivist. Walker assured those concerned that the Speaker was a genealogist of note who had been using the Archives for over sixteen years.

QUESTION: Carl Albert or Tip O'Neil?

ANSWER: Carl Albert. The Justice was Harry A. Blackmun.

The genealogist, on the other hand, has a responsibility as well -- a responsibility to communicate well with the methods the National Archives has for the control of the records and the methodology for getting into the series of records via inventories, guides, etc.

The National Archives has always operated on the principle that if there was a great public use for a series then they'd microfilm it to save the original documents. The Archives had never before microfilmed series of records, as other countries had, which had great potential, unless they had been goaded into it or as a preservation method. For instance, the Census microfilming was for for preservation reasons dictated by the general public's interest in that series of records. One series which the Archives promoted on its own, while probably primarily for preservation concerns and secondarily public interest, was the Revolutionary War records.

The National Archives has upgraded its standards for microfilming those records which had great genealogical value with those which have historical value.

Walker thought there was still room for improvement on the part of both genealogists and National Archives staff members. Walker credited regional archivists as serving both groups better than any other staff members at the Archives, including himself.

QUESTION: Did you travel to various regional Archives centers during your time with the Archives?

ANSWER: Yes. Any time Walker was to give a lecture in an area where there was one he'd visit it -- Philadelphia, Kansas City, Fort Worth, Laguna Niguel, Chicago Atlanta, Seattle, Denver.

One of the things Walker neglected to say was that however much the Archives administration viewed the importance of highlighting the use of NARS selections by genealogists, the one thing the Archives had never done, except during the Roots era, was to include statistically the numbers of genealogists versus historians. This was because the NARS administrative staff felt the U.S. Congress would not appropriate funds to implement their programs if they knew the greater number of researchers using the Archives were genealogists and not government employees, economists, political scientists, etc.

QUESTION: Anything to add?

ANSWER: No, except to say Walker was grateful for his experiences at the National Archives. He holds no hostility toward his former bosses, living or dead. He felt that he received very fair treatment, despite his experiences regarding promotions and his unpleasant experience with the Office of Education. Also, he felt that the top administrative level at the National Archives always supported and encouraged him to do his best as well as to be a spokesman for NARS, especially since 1969 when he became a national recognized authority on records in the National Archives by virtue of being the only black American to be invited by the Mormons to lecture in their archives.

Although Walker saw room for improvement, he was delighted the National Archives had regained its independence. He hoped the problems that existed could be ironed out so that the Archives could become a Federal agency "of note rather than of repute."