

National Archives and Records Service

Oral History Project

Transcript of Interview with General Jess Larson
at his office, 918 - 16th St., Washington, D.C.
June 15, 1972

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This is an interview with General Jess Larson at his office, 918 - 16th Street in Washington, D.C., on June 15, 1972. This interview is being done for the National Archives Oral History Project and is designed to be primarily about the absorption of the National Archives into the General Services Administration and the period up through 1952 when General Larson was Administrator of GSA. The transcript of this interview can well be used in connection with the interview done with General Larson by Jerry N. Hess of the Truman Library for that Library in 1967.

BROOKS: General Larson, in the interview you did some years ago for the Truman Library there was comparatively little said about the problem of the absorption of the National Archives into GSA. Now I think its fair to say that for some years we in the Archives knew that sometime the Archives would be absorbed into some bigger organization because the trend was toward less independent agencies. Now you mentioned some developments on the Hill previous to the Hoover Commission activity that sounded very interesting as leading up to what finally happened.

LARSON: I, yes Phil, I remember quite well a Member of Congress from the State of North Dakota by the name of Robertson. Congressman Robertson was a Republican and I think served four or five terms in the House. He was a very affable man and a very conscientious Member of Congress. I first became

acquainted with Congressman Robertson when I was an Assistant General Counsel of the old War Assets Administration and Congressman Robertson was a Republican member of a select committee whose duty it was to investigate the disposal of surplus property as handled by the War Assets Administration. We became very good friends in the course of our association together and we traveled around the country a great deal on official business. Congressman Robertson later on, I think within the next term or so, probably during the 80th Congress when the Republicans controlled the Congress for the first time in a long time, Congressman Robertson was assigned to the Appropriations Committee of the House and his subcommittee assignment on the Appropriations Committee was what would now, I suppose, correspond to an Independent Offices Appropriations Subcommittee. In any event both the War Assets Administration and the National Archives went before that Committee to justify their request for appropriation. By this time I had become the Administrator of War Assets Administration. I recall quite well that Congressman Robertson, Charlie Robertson, spoke to me about the manner in which some of his colleagues on the Committee were mistreating Dr. Buck who appeared for Archives and how he, Charlie Robertson, felt very sympathetic toward the people representing Archives who were appearing before the Committee and was making every effort to be helpful to them. But he was quite upset at the attitude of his colleagues toward Dr. Buck and toward the Archives in general.

BROOKS: Albert Thomas was on the Appropriations Subcommittee then?

LARSON: Albert Thomas was not the chairman. I don't recall who the chairman was, but he was a member of that subcommittee. And incidentally I might say

that they gave us a hard time too. Then later on when the Reorganization Act of Congress of 1946 became effective there was created in the House and in the Senate committees known as Government Operations Committee, and on the House side Charlie Robertson became a member of that Committee. Chairman of that Committee was a very colorful and distinguished gentleman from Chicago, William Dawson, who was a black man. Also on that Committee was Congressman Chet Holifield of California. The first recollection, or the recollection that I have of my first knowledge of the fact that a commission was going to be established to study the Government and its operations, and perhaps come up with some plans for reorganization, came to me as a result of a conversation I had with Dr. John Steelman who was a member of the President's staff, President Truman's staff, and a very knowledgeable man in the area of government and public affairs. And Dr. Steelman informed me that such a commission was going to be created by the President. Later on this commission was created and, as is well known, the former President of the United States, Herbert Hoover, was called out of virtual retirement by President Truman in a very fine gesture and made the chairman of this commission, period. No wiser choice could have been made in my opinion and it was to develop later on that I personally would work quite closely with some of the task forces of the Hoover Commission, principally the property management task force. It did not become clear to me that I was to play any sort of role in the operations of the General Services Administration during the period of time that I appeared before the property management task force and testified regarding problems in connection with surplus property and the management of surplus property and the disposal of surplus property.

But in the early part of 1949 I decided to leave the Government and pick up my career as a lawyer where I'd left off at the beginning of World War II, and I submitted my resignation to the President and I very promptly got a call from the President's secretary, Appointments Secretary, Mr. Matt Connelly, and he said the President wanted to see me. I assumed it was about my resignation so I went over to the President's office at the appointed time and when I was ushered in to see the President he was very stern about my resignation, which he had in his hand. And he very emphatically informed me that he was not going to accept my resignation because since I had testified regarding property management before the Hoover Commission, and therefore had had some effect on the legislation that was proposed as a result of that Commission's deliberations, that he expected me to follow through and be responsible for a new agency which was going to be set up and they didn't know what they were going to call it but it was going to be responsible for the management of property. I later learned that, well no as a matter of fact the President told me at that time that he was going to move me over to the Federal Works Agency and that I was to become the Administrator there, and that when the legislation was passed creating a central property management agency of the Federal Government, that I was to organize that agency around the then existing Federal Works Agency. Well, this eventually came about. However, in the interim the legislation was pending before the Congress and hearings were being held, quite extensive hearings were being held, before the Government Operations Committees of both houses. My testimony had to do with my experience in property management as a result of administering the old War Assets Administration. And it was during this period of time that I became aware of the fact that in the Act as it was being considered by the

Congress, as it had been sent up to the Congress by the Administration, was the creation of a records management operation. And I recall quite well having met Wayne Grover and Bob Bahmer and Herb Angel in the course of discussions with the Bureau of the Budget _____ people prior to our testimony on the Hill in support of this legislation to create this committee.

BROOKS: This would have been in the spring of 49. The bills were introduced in February by Congressman Dawson and by Senator McClellan.

LARSON: That's correct. This followed in the early spring of that year and I was very much impressed by the kind of professional ability and the leadership that existed in these people from National Archives whom I have just mentioned. And there was never any thought in my mind that if I eventually became head of an agency to administer records management that I was going to depend on these people. There was some pulling and some differences of opinion about whether or not there would be a records management operation and Archives was to be a part of this operation. But so far as I was concerned, the people who had the experience and who had been given the responsibility by the Congress to make reports on the status of records was the Archives people and my support went to those people and how much influence it had I do not know, frankly, but it is a fact, I think, that the record will show that shortly before the passage of the bill which I think was passed in late May or . . .

BROOKS: June 30th.

LARSON: June 30th, yeah. Well maybe this occurred in late May of that year, I don't remember now exact time, but anyway in any event, Archives was to become a part of the General Services Administration as a separate and independent operating organization and Archives was to have the responsibility for records management. And this is the way the bill was enacted. I recall there was some, there was a great deal of last minute drafting and correcting and changing around. The man who was the General Counsel of Federal Works Agency at that time was a lawyer by the name of Maxwell Elliott who was a graduate of Harvard Law School and had had long experience in the Government and was a very able man. Maxwell Elliott did a great deal of the drafting both originally and later on by way of amendment and correction of the Federal Property Act. And I recall having had conferences with Maxwell Elliott about the role that the National Archives was to play, and I made it quite clear to him what my feelings were which are as I have previously stated. Namely that Archives was to be retained intact as an independent operation. That GSA would give it, General Services Administration, would give Archives broad administrative support and would be responsible for a representation of Archives before the Congress and the Bureau of the Budget, but it was by this time apparent that archives and records management was a very important function of the Government and logically fitted into the concept that had grown from the Hoover Commission task force through the Hoover Commission reports to the legislation. Namely, that of a central property and records management tool for the President to administer the Government. Through the Bureau of the Budget the President controls the purse strings of Government

operations, and still does. Through the Civil Service Commission, President controls and manages the personnel of the Government, the people of the Government. Through the General Services Administration the President controls and manages the property and the records of the Government.

BROOKS: One thing that puzzled us, General, is that in May, the last part of May and not until then, Senator McClellan wrote to Grover, and I've looked at the letter just recently, and asked for comments on this pending legislation, S2020, and the House bill then read that the Records Management Bureau would be over the Archives, as late as May. And it wasn't until then that Grover was asked by the people on the Hill to send his comments. And in the latter part of June by a letter that Bahmer wrote as Acting Archivist and also by, there must have been some negotiation involving Holifield and you and Ray Ward and so forth, that was turned around so that the Archives was made superior to the Records Management Bureau and that puzzled us a bit why that took place so late in the process of legislation.

LARSON: I'm afraid I can't shed much light on why it took place. I do recall, you mentioned the name Ray Ward who played a very vital role in this. He was the clerk of the, he was a member of the committee staff in the House that handled this legislation and was very active and Congressman Holifield was the most active member of the committee. But as I have stated before, so far as I was concerned, it was to be Archives with records management responsible to the, as a part of the responsibility of Archives. Now whether the fact that it was then known that the President was going to appoint me as the head of this new agency when it was created had any effect on this or not I don't know, but I do know that I made my views clear to the House Committee. I do

not recall having discussed this with Senator McClellan, although I have vague recollections of having discussed matters with Senator McClellan and his staff. He had a staff member over there by the name of, I'm sorry I can't remember, he just recently retired from that committee. I'll think of it and fill it in in this record. He was the opposite number of Ray Ward and he was very influential. But in the latter days before the passage of this bill, Maxwell Elliott and I spent a great deal of time with the staffs of these two committees and with Congressman Holifield particularly and I feel quite sure that I made my views clear at that time and there was never any other concept so far as I was concerned. There, I was talking about Congressman Charlie Robertson and I didn't bring him into the Government Operations Committee, I don't believe. Congressman Robertson became a Republican member of the Government Operations Committee and I had discussions with him about bringing Archives into General Services and what their functions would be. And Congressman Robertson was a great friend of the whole Archives records management concept and its operation and was of a great deal of influence with his colleagues in creating the agency as it exists today.

BROOKS: Of course I suppose it was very natural that the main emphasis in all this discussion was on the Federal works, the public buildings and supply because they were far bigger activities than the Archives.

LARSON: This is true, Phil, but as time went along, even before the passage of the bill, it became apparent that records management had the sex appeal. At least it did so far as I was concerned, and perhaps this was brought about

by the fact that I had had no previous exposure to this new field of records management and it intrigued me, and still does. It's such a vital and important operation within any large organization.

BROOKS: I think lots of GSA people have had the same experience with the records management in the historical archives aspect.

LARSON: And this is another interesting thing that, so far as I was concerned, developed out of all of this work that, and all of the conferences and sessions and thought that went into the creation of General Services Administration. The relationship between records and space. Space is vital, of course to the operations of any organization, and it's expensive and if that space is cluttered up with unnecessary records, records that are not properly managed, this is dollars and cents to the Government. It's a tool of efficient management and a very important one.

BROOKS: Do you think that Frank Pace, who was Director of the Budget, and Fred Lawton, who succeeded him during the time this was all going on, or the President were concerned or had any special interest in the records problem?

LARSON: There were some people in the Bureau of the Budget, there was a boy with a long German name.

BROOKS: Stauffacher, Charlie Stauffacher?

LARSON: Charlie Stauffacher. Charlie Stauffacher was a very able student of the science of Government. The art of Government perhaps better put. And Charlie Stauffacher I know had a great deal of influence insofar as this legislation was concerned. Charlie Stauffacher definitely had an appreciation for . . . Frank Pace left shortly after this to go to the Army as Secretary

and I don't recall much of what his feelings were. Fred Lawton was an old pro insofar as Government was concerned and my recollections about Fred come more after I was Administrator of General Services but I do, my recollection is that Fred had a deep appreciation for records management. But let me tell you something about President Truman. President Truman had a keen awareness of everything that was contained in this legislation.

BROOKS: I bet he did.

LARSON: And he had a keen awareness for the importance of centralized property management and discussed it with me on more than one occasion. Even in the early days of the Hoover Commission's deliberations. Now, after the bill passed and the agency was set up and had been in operation about 2 months, I was invited by the President to appear before the Cabinet and brief the Cabinet on the concept and functions of the General Services Administration. And I recall in the long hours that I put in in preparation for that briefing, which was a very important one for this new fledging agency, that I depended a great deal on Wayne Grover and his boys from Archives and they furnished me a great deal of assistance and help and construction of charts and pictorial presentations and so forth. And in my presentation to the Cabinet, which I'm somewhat embarrassed to say lasted an hour, I was interrupted only one time and that was by the President himself. And that was at the point where I was discussing this concept of central records management within the Government. I recall at the end of that presentation I received a round of applause from the Cabinet, which I was told was quite unusual. The President made some comments and then the Vice President, Alben Barkley, rose to his feet and

in his finest oratorical manner gave some quite glowing compliments to the whole concept and to my modest presentation.

BROOKS: Speaking of Vice Presidents, do you remember that there was brooded about an idea for a department of administration to be administered by the Vice President? I understand this was Earl Warren's idea when he was running for Vice President. Was that generally known and talked about at the time? He would include, as I understand it, Budget Bureau, Civil Service, and General Services.

LARSON: Yes, I recall in a very general way, that this was kicked around so to speak by the Hoover Commission but so far as I know it never got into any serious task force discussions. I am under the impression that that concept was eliminated by the Commission itself even before the task force organization was set up. I'm not sure.

BROOKS: Well, the election was lost by Governor Warren before the task forces reports were finally made. You know that Warren has since become a very close friend of Mr. Truman's and comes almost every year to the annual meetings of our Institute Board at the Truman Library.

LARSON: Yes, I know he'd become a friend. I remember at the dedication of the Library he was very much in prominence there.

BROOKS: In the interview you did with Mr. Hess you talked about some of the difficulties absorbing the component units into GSA. Some of the problems of, oh, the Federal works and the public buildings and so forth. But I gathered, and this concurs with my memory and everything I've heard about it, that your relationship with the Archives was always a pretty friendly one.

LARSON: Oh yes. The trouble I had, well Public Buildings for instance, stemmed from the fact that Bert Reynolds had been running Public Buildings in the manner in which he wanted to run it for a good many years and he'd been permitted to do that. He was a very able man and he had a knack of getting along with the Congress and he was in the habit of going his own merry way and while I retained him as the Commissioner of Public Buildings because of these abilities, he was not very happy about subjecting his judgment to some second guessing from the Administrator's office. However, and this brought up some passing crisis from time to time, but we always were able to resolve them, I believe. In contrast to that, of course, was Wayne Grover's operation and the attitude of the people from the Archives. From the very beginning it was a very cooperative attitude. It was expressed to me, as I recall, by Wayne Grover in the sense that Archives was very happy to be a part of GSA and very happy to have someone that would assume the responsibility for relationship with the Congress and with the other agencies of the Government.

BROOKS: They all felt they got good support from you, I know.

LARSON: And it was a very fine personal relationship that I had with these people and they were forward looking. Their whole program and their whole approach to all their problems was very forward looking and yet it was tempered by practicality too. There was no pie in the sky kind of thinking. It was good, sound, solid management thinking.

BROOKS: The most important development, I think, that took place so far as the Archives was concerned while you were Administrator was the passage of the Federal Records Act of 1950. Did they work by you closely on that, do you remember?

LARSON: I would give the Wayne Grover and his staff full credit for the passage of that Act.

BROOKS: That really carried out, fulfilled the program that was set up at the time at GSA.

LARSON: It certainly fulfilled my broad concept of the function of Archives.

BROOKS: Until that Act was passed, and I was very much interested at the time, there was no requirement that Government agencies create meaningful records. That Act was the first time it brought it in. And it spelled out the responsibility of the agency to conduct a records management program and then it served the, most of the provisions of the National Archives Act. I thought it was fine and I still do.

LARSON: Well I couldn't agree with you more and I think that close examination would show the benefit that the Government has derived from it. And in this connection I have felt that there was a wedding of the present with the past. The responsibility for maintaining effective records, which in time become the history of the period and therefore the bridge between the past and the present and the vehicle by which the historian can always follow that logically through each step, is created by the Federal Records Act and its implementation as it has been carried on by the Archives.

BROOKS: General, at the time of the legislation setting up GSA, do you remember there being any expression of opinion with or any negotiation with any of the historical organizations, the people who were interested in, researchers to the records? I don't think there was.

LARSON: Well frankly Phil, I don't, I have no personal recollection of that. It seems to me that the logic of the concept was so overwhelming that there was not any room for questioning it.

BROOKS: Well the people that have been unhappy since then about the General Services concept have been mostly the people who were primarily interested in the historical use of the records. Didn't feel they went together.

LARSON: It was certainly the function of Archives in the narrow sense of the term for the records for the historian was never downgraded. It was never intended to be downgraded. It was, on the contrary, it was intended that by centralized management of the various presidential libraries and the sources of the Archives would bring about not only more orderly dissemination of historical information but would create an environment and facilities that would make it more, make it easier for the historian to carry out his researching work.

BROOKS: The other important event of the time, most important event of the time that you were Administrator I think you dealt with effectively in the interview with Mr. Hess and that was the transfer of the Constitution and the Declaration of Independence to the Archives. I was there that day. That was a great day.

LARSON: That was, there it is right over there. See that picture behind you?

BROOKS: Oh yeah. Okay Sir. Well thanks very much indeed. I think that answers my questions unless there's something else you think should be said about the Archives.

LARSON: No, I can't think of a thing, Phil.