

NATIONAL ARCHIVES ORAL HISTORY PROJECT
Abstract of interview with John Porter Bloom
June 24 1985 at National Archives Building, Washington, DC
Interviewer: Rodney A. Ross (National Archives Employee)
Tape length: Both sides of one 60-minute cassette
Summary abstract prepared by Geraldine Ludwig (National Archives Volunteer)
Editorial revision by Rodney A. Ross

Notes: Bloom is currently a free-lance historian. From 1962 until December 1, 1980, he served as head of the Territorial Papers project at the National Archives.

The interview concentrates on Bloom's work with the Territorial Papers project.

The interview, close to an hour in length, was conducted at the National Archives during a trip Bloom had made to Washington, DC, from his home in California. Bloom's remarks can be clearly heard. Those of the interviewer [Ross] are sometimes barely audible.

Background: John Porter Bloom was originally from New Mexico and grew up in that state with a professional historian father and a mother who was very interested in history. He had an inclination to stay away from history in his early years. As he went on to graduate school, at the end of World War II, thinking that he might want to get into the U.S. Foreign Service, he got more interested in history and got into an excellent Ph.D. program at Emory University. He decided to follow in his father's footsteps. He made a specialty of western history, which was not a natural thing to do at Emory. He worked into his doctoral thesis the specialty of his mentor, Bell Irwin Wiley, and his own interest in Western History by doing a study of common soldier life during the war with Mexico, 1846-48. Following something of the routine of young professional historians, he went into college teaching and decided that he didn't like that work. He had the opportunity in 1960, after about seven years of teaching, to accept a position as a member of a museum planning team in St. Louis, Missouri. He lived there for about a year and a half. When that project came to an end, he transferred with the National Park Service to Washington and arrived here in January of 1962. He worked for two and half years with the National Park Service as editor of the publication series one the National Survey of Historic Sites and Buildings. Meeting various people in historical circles during the natural course of events, he became interested in the opportunity that opened at the National Archives to become editor of the Territorial Papers of the United States. Interviewed by Bob Bahmer and Wayne Grover, he accepted the position. While he was enjoying his work with the National Park Service, he felt the work at the Archives would be more of an intellectual and professional challenge.

[SIDE 1]

Rod Ross: I was rereading Donald McCoy's book on the National Archives, and he mentioned Clarence Carter's death in 1961. Was there an interim period where there was no editor, presumably you took over in 1962...

John Porter Bloom: That's right. There was a period of uncertainty about continuing the program in the manner in which Clarence Carter had conducted it. It took the Archives a while to make up its mind what to do. The final decision to carry on for the time being, at least, in the pattern of work Clarence Carter had determined toward the end of his tenure: to work into a program of publishing on microfilm substantially all (you never get it all) of the records of a given territory—proceeding territory by territory, then to publish in letterpress (it was actually done by offset printing) selected records of the territories, one by one. During the interim period there was only one employee that carried on, and he was not working much of this time actively for the Territorial Project papers.

Harold W. Ryan was available and very helpful to Bloom when he came to work on the papers in explaining Carter's method of work and his plans. He showed Bloom what had been done up until the time of Carter's death.

Ross: For the record could you explain what Carter's approach was, plus some of his strong and/or weak points. He was with the project for thirty years.

Bloom: Clarence Carter had been the original editor of the project. Many people had been involved in setting it up, but Carter was the first editor and the only editor before Bloom came aboard. Bloom did not know him personally, he had heard him speak once or twice at professional meetings, however. He had quite a distinguished career, interested in the Old Northwest Territory in the early federal and late colonial period. He taught at Miami University in Oxford, Ohio, and throughout his tenure at the Archives, maintained a connection with Miami U. He would teach there for summer school or, now and again, accept a graduate student to see through an advanced degree, although he maintained his primary residence in Washington, DC.

It was significant to Bloom that the program continued even through World War II, when so many things in the way of historical projects were dropped by the wayside. His method of operation was to rely primarily on the work and accuracy of assistants to page through record series and identify letters, memoranda, reports, that might pertain to the territory on which he was working. In the very early days, while working on the first territories, he was very well

acquainted with the records through his own personal writing and research. For the 1790s and the first couple of decades of the nineteenth century, there was not a great volume of records with which to work, to survey, and to identify the origin and subject matter of any given document. The reliance on other people, such as Harold Ryan and others to identify individual records as pertaining to a given territory came with the later territories for which the bulk of materials was very large, and it was growing larger as the project advanced into the nineteenth century. With these records identified, and as needed, copied, he would determine what would be included in the published paper, what would be referred to only by footnote, some sort of annotation, introduction, etc. and leave all the rest to go under the microfilm camera and not require any special attention. He gave his primary attention, as Bloom understood it, to problems of uncertain identification of records, to the more difficult things.

Ross: When Wayne Grover and Bob Bahmer talked to you about the position, why did they want to have it continued? Did they expect that you would complete the project?

Bloom: Bloom thought that they were uncertain that the project would ever be completed. The Archives staff had been realistically uncertain that the style of production that Carter had set up was realistic in terms of the tremendous accumulation one finds especially in the post Civil War territories of the Far West. There had been strong recommendations that the project be discontinued upon Clarence Carter's death. It had been considered before this time, but not seriously. When the matter was discussed in important circles and in the Council of the American Historical Association and the then Mississippi Valley Historical Association, now the Organization of American States, there were some individuals who protested most strongly and made strenuous representations that the project should be continued and if at all possible brought to completion. The Archivist of the United States was in some degree and, in spite of his own skepticism, submitting to some pressure in order to justify reopening the project and carrying it on for a number of years.

Ross: For the record, could you go through which territories you dealt with during your tenure as editor?

Bloom: When Bloom came on board he began with the territory of Wisconsin. Clarence Carter had done a good bit of work, and he completed the two published volumes of the Territorial Papers series on Wisconsin Territory. While they were working on the publication problems of these volumes, they were beginning the identification and microfilming of records for the next territory taken in chronological order on the basis of the establishment as a separate territory, the Iowa Territory. In the course of Bloom's work they completed a volume, which would have been a very large one. As they drew to a close on Iowa Territory, in terms of selecting the

records, the staff went on and started producing the microfilm publication for the Minnesota Territory and the Oregon Territory. In this there was a bit of an innovation in that one person going through a single series of records would be putting things to the right and left and above and below or however was physically convenient, in other words, identifying records of two different territories at the same time. Bloom himself was working primarily with the microfilm publication after it was finished or with prints made from the microfilm. He didn't personally handle the records very much. The Iowa Territory was substantially finished. The work on Oregon and Minnesota was well advanced. By 1980 there were at least 6 or 8 rolls for each territory finished and a number of others that were pretty well advanced. Bloom left the project in December of 1980.

Ross: For your staff—who did you have and what particular responsibilities did they have?

Bloom: Bloom started out with just Harold Ryan. Over the years there were a number of people who worked on the secretarial level. The one secretarial assistant that was outstanding for Bloom was Julia Ward Stickley. She had been assigned to other offices in the Archives before coming to work for the Territorial Papers and was very useful in knowing her way around the building and knowing people and was a very distinguished lady in many ways. She had to retire because of age. Tom Gedosch worked with the project for a time when he first came to the National Archives and was still with the project almost up until the time of Bloom's own retirement. Willie Richards was with the project almost all of the time of Bloom's tenure. He was pleasant to work with and also accurate and knowledgeable and accurate about selecting the materials for microfilming. Bloom has maintained contact with him. Mrs. Ann Gray was another excellent employee, still at the National Archives. Others to work on the project were Herman Viola and Lee Tyson.

During a time when they were assigned space in 20W, Bloom had the unusual pleasure of a relationship with Ernst Posner. In his retirement years, Posner was assigned a desk in their area and came in very regularly. He never worked for the Territorial Papers, but it was an unusually pleasant relationship in that very distinguished man's last years.

Ross: I had done a paper on Ernst Posner, and Julia was one of my key sources, and you've now put things together in my mind, since she was probably answering the telephone for him as well as physically on your staff.

Bloom: Bloom stated that, as a matter of fact, while he was there his slightest wish was her command and that was fine with the rest of the office.

Ross: One thing I wanted to cover was simply your work in the National Archives building. A

very mundane question, but if we could talk about heating, cooling, lighting, elevator—what is this building like?

Bloom: One of the things that was most striking to Bloom in coming back as a visitor, was the change in attitude as far as security is concerned. When he came to work in 1964, it was such a free and easy place to get around. His first office assignment was on the east side of the building, about 7 or 9E. He remembered that he had an outside window and the window opened right out onto the balcony that surrounds the building with a magnificent view of the street, if one goes out on the balcony a little. It's unthinkable now to open those windows and go out to eat lunch, but it was perfectly ordinary in those days. When inauguration day, 1965 rolled around, the family came and they did go out on the balcony and enjoyed the view of the inaugural parade. As years passed, Bloom's recollection of inaugural day is a key of recollection of tightening of security and also some increased stratification of the increasing withdrawal of top brass from the ordinary working SKIFs in that access to special places like this have been more and more restricted. Upon one occasion, when the project was assigned to 20W, it was still possible to bring the family in and have a picnic lunch in the office and have a little television set to watch the beginning of the parade. Then they went out to see it in person. There always had been a problem with the heating and air conditioning. As he sat in 2W2 for the interview Bloom mentioned he felt a little uncomfortable.

Ross: Your staff had to obtain documents from custodial units. What kind of access problems, if any, did you have in obtaining free use of the stacks for your staff to do research? Did you end up borrowing documents?

Bloom: Bloom said that they hardly ever had to borrow documents in the sense of taking them out of the area and taking them into their own area. Their own working area was not ordinarily a secure area and they were reasonably conscientious about not having any records in that area, especially not having them overnight. But they would sometimes carry something in for a special study. The custodial units were typically entirely cooperative with permitting people such as Harold Ryan and Willie Richards ready access. In the case of these men, especially, they were personally well acquainted with practically everybody in the building. In some cases, they knew better than the people in the custodial unit what they had. They would often be given work space in the stacks convenient to the series with which they were working. They would carry boxes or truckloads over at a time to go through at a desk or workstation in the stack area. In the very early days, when the National Archives was new and was still bringing records in, Clarence Carter and Harold Ryan and others who worked for the project would take their portable typewriter and go around to different buildings in the DC-area as itinerant historians to seek access to records still held in agency files. In Bloom's tenure, they never had to go outside the building, except to Suitland to get access.

Ross: Once documents had been identified, what was the process involved in getting them microfilmed?

Bloom: The microfilming was done in-house in every instance. The people going through the records would list and tab each item to be microfilmed. "Tabbed" meant a slip was put in as a guide to the film camera operator. When considerable bulk had been done, a decision would be made as to where the roll break would be in microfilming them. Introductory material would be prepared. Targets would be prepared, the material, after being identified by project people would be set aside on carts, usually segregated in hopes that other researchers would not use the material until the microfilming had been done. This sometimes caused some problems, naturally.

Question: Organizationally, were you considered a part of the NN part of the Archives staff?

Answer: Organizationally, the project was always considered way off in left field. It became clear as pressure built up again to terminate the project. This was a disadvantage. The project's status was somewhat uncertain. Bloom's employment interview was conducted by Bob Bahmer and Wayne Grover in their capacity as Deputy Archivist and Archivist of the United States in the early 1960s and as long as Bob Bahmer was Deputy Archivist and then Archivist, Bloom reported to him. Bloom believed that he was organizationally assigned, to begin with, under NN. Certainly the project came under Edward Campbell's aegis in a later time when Campbell was director at NN. This was merely a bookkeeping arrangement. Bloom did not have any guidance or interference or hardly any relationship at all organizationally, administratively, with anybody below the Deputy Archivist's level. When Bert Rhoads became Deputy Archivist the relationship continued, but as other records will show, the National Archives under Bert Rhoads' administration became more and more administratively hidebound: reporting level by level by level became more important than they had been before. This happened as far as the Territorial Papers was concerned also.

Ross: What was the reporting chain during Bert Rhoads' tenure as Archivist, as far as you were concerned?

Bloom: Bloom stated that he found it difficult to remember exactly what happened at exactly what time in that period. He stated that he would rather not speak of that period in any detail for fear of showing uncertainty as to the details. What weighed on his mind was simply that things became more and more bureaucratized there.

Ross: A couple of related questions—for things like determining your budgetary needs, did

you go through Walt Robertson in submitting requests that would be dealt with in-house and then eventually sent over to GSA?

Bloom: The situation was one where he was hardly consulted as to budgetary needs. It was assigned through NN. Bloom's relationship with people below NN was informal. His status was that of Branch Chief and there was a division assignment, but the Division Chief that he worked for the most part knew little about and took little interest in what he was doing. It was pretty much assumed by them that Bloom's relationship was directly with NN and with the Deputy Archivist.

Ross: So you didn't attend Branch Chief meetings?

Bloom: No, I did not, ordinarily.

Ross: Could you discuss your decision to retire as well as the Archives decision about what to do about the Territorial Papers in 1980?

Bloom: In the early 1970s some pressure began to build up, that is there was some informal comment and despair about how slowly the project was going and the prospect that I would never be terminated within the lifetime of any person then living or now living for that matter. In view of the bulk of materials available for the later territories, the crude calculations were that it would take 150 years to finish the project at the rate at which it was then being carried on. That was an unrealistic figure, but there was enough validity to it to say that even if it were three times bigger, it would be a more realistic estimate. Was it still going to be worthwhile finishing the project, if it were going to take 50 years, let's say?

In this period, special interests in history were flourishing and some of them still are, such as ethnic history, family studies, demography, population studies, and the use of computers for various forms of political and other analysis. What the Territorial Papers project stands for was somewhat old-fashioned basic political history. There was criticism of the National Archives voiced in the Advisory Council and elsewhere about employing substantial manpower and money in the project. The argument was that it was old-fashioned, that nobody was using it, that nobody would ever use it, and that the Archives should put its resources into other activities. A special committee was set up through the Organization of American Historians and the American Historical Association and the Society of American Archivists to make a special review of the project and make recommendations. The recommendation was that the project be terminated was given to the Archivist of the United States and the Advisory Council. Bloom did not recall which year the recommendation was finally submitted, although there was some uncertainty whether it ever was submitted in final form. The Archivist plainly

wished to see the resources of the Archives used for other projects and it was intimated to Bloom that it would be quite agreeable if he were to take early retirement and they would be in a position of closing down the project by simply never appointing another editor.

That in effect is what happened. Bloom was from the West, and while this work had been professionally satisfying in many ways, he felt that he had lived in Washington a long time, and he was anxious to get back to his western setting, and his wife felt likewise. Everything seemed to work out in terms of professional and personal life and wishes to the point of easing out and working into something for a tail-end career as far as his own work was concerned that would be more satisfactory.

Ross: You said the Archivist—was this Warner?

Bloom: It was before Warner.

Ross: When did Bert Rhoads leave? Or was this the interregnum period?

Bloom: It was right in that interregnum. Bloom's date of early retirement was December 1, 1980. Warner was about to come in about this time. The decision in terms of the future of the project was through the National Archives Advisory Council and was plainly put in place by Bert Rhoads as Archivist.

Ross: Did Jim O'Neill play a role in ending the project?

Bloom: Bloom was not aware of O'Neill taking any interest one way or another as far as the Territorial Papers project was concerned. He was not identified as a special friend or supporter of the Territorial Papers project.

Ross: Which Record Groups did you use?

Bloom: Substantially all record groups of the Federal Government: Post Office, military, etc. When you come to the territories you have very important military activities out there involving the building of posts and transportation and development of military-Indian affairs. Clarence Carter had taken some interest in Indian Affairs. Bloom took more in the selection of records he published in terms of Indian affairs. The Territorial Papers was subject to legitimate criticism in terms of historians engaged in western history research. When you come to such things as postal activities and Military and Indian affairs, they very often crossed jurisdictional boundaries between territories over wide regions, and the staff often had to make arbitrary and from some standpoints unsatisfactory decisions in dividing up territories, in dividing

records—assigning some to one territory and others to another territory, when they were in a sense relating to, supporting, or telling a much larger story, not relating strictly to the territory.

Ross: Of the various states, did any of them give financial support for the publication of the project, or did they involve themselves with distribution of the final work?

Bloom: The response of the state historical societies in supporting the project was extremely important in its origins going back to the 1920s and 30s, referring primarily to the states of the Old Northwest. State historical societies of other states took less interest in general in the project. Indeed, when they came to the question of continuing the project in the 1970s, the staff had some contact with the directors of historical societies in key states such as Iowa and Minnesota and Oregon and while the then director of the historical society in Iowa was extremely supportive and worked very hard to get publication money for the manuscript which we had substantially finished and which Bloom assumed was still lying around in the Archives building, the Iowa director was unable to provide money for its publication. In the case of the director of the Minnesota Historical Society, he was opposed to the project's continuation.

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Bloom: The Minnesota Historical Society's Director reached the decision that he would prefer to see the project abolished, and the projected volumes of the Minnesota records never published because he felt that the Minnesota State Historical Society benefited more from other programs of the National Archives than it would from the Territorial Papers project. Bloom found this a really remarkable conclusion, but it was one that carried considerable weight here in Washington, DC Tom Vaughn in the Oregon Historical Society showed little interest, although he was not so negative as his colleague in Minnesota was. There was very little interest in the project on the part of historians and historical society directors in other western states. One of the obvious criticisms of the project and reasons for it not getting support in certain areas was that certain key western states were never territories. Texas had no interest in the project because it was never a territory. California, similarly, had no interest in the project. The question of whether the project would be extended to include Alaska and Hawaii was never tackled seriously. It was one of those things off in limbo and served perhaps to discourage people in thinking about continuing the project indefinitely.

Ross: Did the State Department have any continuing interest in the project after you had become editor?

Bloom: None whatsoever.

Ross: What about your relations with NHPRC? Right now, it would seem that the Territorial Papers project would be the kind of thing NHPRC would be interested in. Do you think that is a correct assumption on my part?

Bloom: Oliver Wendell Holmes, as director of NHPRC, was very deeply concerned about the project and Bloom apologized for leaving him out of the original negotiations and arrangements by which Bloom was brought to the National Archives. Holmes was involved along with Bob Bahmer and Wayne Grover in desiring to revive the program, a couple of years after Clarence Carter's death. As long as Oliver Wendell Holmes was director of NHPRC, there was a good and healthy and ongoing relationship. The directors of NHPRC since Holmes' death have interests primarily in doing their own things which are controllable through their own advisory board and have little interest in the Territorial Papers.

Ross: How did the actuality of the situation compare with what had been your initial anticipations?

Bloom: Bloom felt he had been rather naive in stepping into this situation and adopting the hope, or expectation or assumption, that it would be a career-long activity, indeed that it would comprise the rest of his professional career. His own personal feeling about it were of no importance to anybody except himself and his wife, he suggested. He thought it was unfortunate that the historical profession had found itself seized from time to time with a rather excessive zeal to pick up new fads, such as family history and the ethnic history, and some other activities. He believed that the long term historical interests of U.S. history would be well served by continuing and completing the Territorial Papers project in some form so as to round out the story. It's very easy to cast off on old fashioned political history, but when one gets down into analysis of human life in earlier years in this country and other countries, the old fashioned political history, recognizing important limitations, is still an absolutely basic thing, and our country is not well served by ignoring the most basic elements that we have, while it pursues fads and even fancies as far as history is concerned.

Ross: Are you aware of the distribution in terms of sales figures for the microfilm editions as well as letterpress copies of the volumes that you worked with?

Bloom: Bloom had figures in the late 70s and more or less up until the time he had left the National Archives and they were unimpressive in terms of numbers. One of the problems they had with guessing the extent of use of our volumes, not only the ones he had issued, but the earlier ones by Clarence Carter, was that they were typically in the college university

libraries or any library, placed on a reference shelf where the people who used them didn't check them out, but used them right then and there and there was no record of them being used. For other books, you have a record. You can look on the back, on the tab, and see how many have checked it out over a period of time. The project staff could only guess, and the impression of the typical university librarian was that the Territorial Papers volumes were never used. They were inclined to place them in more and more remote areas and even to throw them out. Of course, they were less used. It was to some degree, a self-fulfilling prophecy: We predict they won't be used, so we'll put them where they can't be used and therefore they won't be used and that's the end of the project.

Ross: Do you know if college history teachers used the volumes in their courses?

Bloom: Yes there were some but not many, and the overall usefulness of the results of the project would have been greatly enhanced by its completion. As it stands now, it's an incomplete thing and a typical historian approaching it to use it or find out what's in it, will say, "Well, it contain some territories, but it isn't finished," and if that historian or political scientist or economist, or what have you is interested in doing some comparative study, it's limitation by being incomplete operates against it.

Ross: Mary Walton Livingston had been on Clarence Carter's staff in the 1930s and is now back at the National Archives. Did you ever have conversations with her about either the objectives or the workings of Territorial Papers staff from the 1930s to the 1970s.

Bloom: Bloom didn't remember any particular conversations with her. His main insight into Clarence Carter's operation was through Harold Ryan who had gone to work for Clarence Carter before World War II, about 1939. He went back almost as far, possibly further than she did.

Ross: Ed Nixon was also on that staff...

Bloom: Bloom never knew him.

In summary: Bloom states that this is just a small footnote in the history of the National Archives and he was glad to have had this much of his rather informal impressions put into the record at this time.

[END]

NATIONAL ARCHIVES AND RECORDS ADMINISTRATION

Legal Agreement Pertaining to the Oral History Interview of

John Porter Bloom

In accordance with the provisions of Chapter 21 of Title 44, United States Code, and subject to the terms and conditions hereinafter set forth, I,

John Porter Bloom of Stockton, California
(name) (city and state)

do hereby give, donate and convey to the United States of America all my rights, title and interest in the tape recording and transcript of a personal interview conducted on June 24, 1985 at the National Archives Building in Washington, D.C. and prepared for deposit in the National Archives. This assignment is subject to the following terms and conditions:

- (1) The tape recording shall be available to all researchers upon its being accessioned by the National Archives.
- (2) The transcript shall be available to those researchers who have access to the tape recording, as soon as the National Archives' processing schedule allows sufficient time for transcript preparation.
- (3) I hereby assign to the United States Government all copyright I may have in the interview transcript and tape.
- (4) Copies of the transcript and the tape recording may be provided by the National Archives to researchers upon request.
- (5) Copies of the transcript and tape recording may be deposited in or loaned to institutions other than the National Archives.

Donor *John P. Bloom*

Frank J. Burke
Archivist of the United States

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CONFERENCE ON
THE HISTORY OF
THE TERRITORIES

NOVEMBER 3-4, 1969

DR. JOHN PORTER
BLOOM