

U.S. NATIONAL ARCHIVES AND RECORDS ADMINISTRATION
Transcript of National Archives History Office Oral History Interview
Subject: Marvin Kabakoff
Interviewer: Jack Kabrel
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MR. JACK KABREL: This is the oral history recording of Marvin Kabakoff on April 15, 2015, in Waltham, Massachusetts. This will be Marvin's history, as his retirement is on April 24, 2015. Marvin, describe, if you can, how you came to work at the National Archives and why.

MR. MARVIN KABAKOFF: Okay. I was doing part-time teaching in St. Louis and looking for jobs as a full-time professor and there were no jobs. A friend of mine from grad school, Alan Perry, who was already with the National Archives, suggested that I apply for a position. He said that it was history-related and it paid okay and it had benefits, so it seemed like a good thing to do.

And so I took the civil service exam and, a few months after that, was selected for a training position to be an archivist, starting at the National Personnel Records Center in St. Louis.

MR. KABREL: What were you doing prior to the National Archives?

MR. KABAKOFF: I was teaching part-time, mostly at community colleges in St. Louis, but actually wherever they would hire me. And jobs were getting scarce, so I needed something permanent and full-time.

MR. KABREL: How did your education influence your decision to come to the National Archives?

MR. KABAKOFF: Well, I was a history major undergrad. My Ph.D. was in French history, so I wanted to do something that was history-related. And certainly the National Archives has a strong history component and, in fact, to be an archivist at the time, and I'm not sure if it's still the case, you had to have 30 hours of American history or politics or some related field.

And so it's definitely, my history degree was something useful in a job and actually having a PhD helped. The National Archives was good at the process of hiring a lot of history PhDs who could not get jobs in academia.

MR. KABREL: Interesting. What would this timeframe be? Can you encapsulate a timeframe period that we're talking here as your history in the National Archives?

MR. KABAKOFF: Yeah. I started in October 1977 in St. Louis, and so, that's 37 and a half years ago.

MR. KABREL: What were your impressions of the agency at the time that you began?

MR. KABAKOFF: It was certainly very different from academia. There were some things that were just funny. Part of the trade-in was that I was a CIDS trainee, which is Career Intern Development System, and so as a CIDS trainee you were expected to work in all the different parts of the National Personnel Records Center. And then I got sent out for training in arrangement and description at Missouri

Historical Society and training in exhibits at the Jefferson National Memorial Expansion Museum, which was the Gateway Arch.

But, yeah, for the first time I realized that not everybody got the day off after Thanksgiving. I didn't know that was a work day for people.

More significantly, the style of writing was very different. I was used to writing academically and there was the Cloud Index, when you wrote something for distribution within the Records Center, you know, any kind of memo, the Cloud Index measured the number of multisyllabic words in a sentence and if the measurement was too high then you had to rewrite it to use simpler words. And I was kind of floored by that.

But the people were great. And I actually ran into some students of mine. At the time, NARA, or then it was NARS, paid for students to take American history classes, and so several of my coworkers had been students of mine when I was teaching American history at the community college. So that was actually very good.

But it was just a very different environment from what I was used to, and challenging in that way. The work was mostly interesting but not all of it; the memorizing was not my favorite part. But there were two of us who were hired who were being trained. We were essentially apprentice archivists with somebody who was out from Washington working on a project and we worked alongside him. And so it was on-the-job training to be an archivist with, yeah, some classes in Washington.

There were about 100,000 cubic feet of military organizational records, which most people didn't know about; they thought we just had personnel records. And those, the organizational records, were unscheduled and so we started out working on the 50,000 cubic feet of Army records. They were all field command records. The military had all field commands send their records to St. Louis between, from the late '40s to the early '60s. But a lot of the material that was sent dated back much earlier, some of it, the late 19th century.

And then that part of the work was really interesting, although coming from essentially a pacifist background and dealing only with military records was certainly a challenge. And again, coming as a historian, when I first started I wanted to save everything because I could figure out some kind of use for every sheet of paper.

And then after a period of time of working with the records, I actually wanted to destroy everything. And then came to a happy medium where I just was focusing on what was really historically significant.

MR. KABREL: The National Archives had a program in place that would cross-train you in different areas of the Archives? Is that what CIDS was about?

MR. KABAKOFF: Yes. And so at NPRC I worked there writing memos and doing, and part of the time I was doing appraisal or being trained in appraisal. So I worked with the Navy branch doing searches, trying to find records or working on responding to requests from veterans for records. And I did a little bit of work with the Reconstruction Branch.

When I started, it was only four years after the fire in 1973, so the Reconstruction Branch was still, and continues to be a very active part of the National Archives, Reconstructing records that were burned or trying to find material. And so part of our job was to help the Reconstruction Branch find associated

material that could fill in for the 18 million records that were burned. And that was fun. That was really a challenge and very interesting, and dealing with the burned records. So you got some conservation and as well as everything else.

MR. KABREL: So that early training gave you a better appreciation of the scope of what NARA had, as well as the appreciation of what is actually permanent as opposed to what would be temporary?

MR. KABAKOFF: Right. We didn't, at the time, have an archives. NPRC has an archives now, so all the permanent records that we were dealing with went there. The plan was for them to end up in Washington or possibly some field units.

So the reference that we did was for military personnel records and individuals or organizations, looking for a specific veteran's records. Sometimes it was the veterans themselves. Sometimes it was police departments. We got involved with finding the record of the individual who was holding the Washington Monument hostage. And we had to find his record, of course, very quickly. So we ended up getting involved in some interesting things.

MR. KABREL: Before we move onto your next course of work after St. Louis, can you just tell us a little bit about the agency structure at that time?

MR. KABAKOFF: Just some examples we wrote up a lot of 115s, obviously, on appraising. You had different echelons of the military so, one for the commands, one for centers, you know, schools, whatever. And we'd send them on to what was a Military Archives Division in Washington. And at one point we got a response back from them saying that these were nice but maybe they should have NARA archivists looking at the records. And my colleague and I were floored. You know, "Hello, people. NPRC is part of NARA. We are NARA archivists, pay attention."

Another time we were doing an exhibit on 20th century Presidents in the military. And we wanted some photographs from still pictures. And my colleague called them to see what it would cost to get a copy, and it was a fairly high cost, like \$50 for a copy. My colleague asked if that was a cost for outside or was it an in-house cost, and the other person responded that it was for outside requesters. And my colleague said, you know, we're part of NARA, and the person said, "No, you're not." And you're trying to convince folks in Washington that field units and particularly NPRC was not part of the military but was indeed part of the National Archives—it was a constant struggle and sometimes really painful.

So, in many ways that attitude has not improved over the years. Just a constant source of difficulty and actually irritation. And what made it worse was that in the field as CIDS trainees our supervisors were kind into this, holier than thou thing because we were in the field we have to do even more work than the CIDS trainees in Washington.

And so we worked harder. Our quarterly panels were more stringent, all of the requirements were more stringent because we were in the field and that we felt like we had to prove ourselves as being just as good as the folks in Washington.

MR. KABREL: How long did you stay in St. Louis and where did you go after that?

MR. KABAKOFF: I was at NPRC for almost ten years, from October of '77 to April of '87. And then there was an opening for an Appraisal and Disposition Branch Chief in Boston and I applied and I got the job. And being a New Englander I never felt at home in St. Louis, and so once again back to New England and

having went to college in Boston, Boston was sort of an ideal place for me to live. So I came back in April of '87, and became A&D Chief in Waltham and stayed in that position through a couple of reorganizations.

I think when we reorganized and a Records Management division was set up. And I applied to be a part of that because A&D was going to become part of the Record Center, or the service section. We were part of the Record Center, but we were going to be under the service section instead of a separate unit. And so it made sense for me to go into Records Management. And so that occurred in probably '99. And the work didn't change all that, well, the work did change but the focus was still on relating to working with agencies in the region, which is what one does as an A&D Chief.

And then I stayed with that until the next reorganization which was 2010 or '11, when Records Management was broken up and we were all put on teams. And then I joined the Agency Assistance team, which again, continued the same kind of work that I'd been doing in Records Management, and again, a continuation of some of the stuff that I had done as A&D Chief—working with Federal agencies and helping them with their records problems and concerns. And so I'll be retiring from the Records Management division from the Agency Assistance team.

MR. KABREL: Thank you. This second grouping of questions are going to be general questions about the National Archives, and then we'll finish up with final reflections upon the National Archives. What would you view as some of your greatest successes or the most significant projects that you were involved in with the National Archives?

MR. KABAKOFF: Yeah, the first and probably of all my time the most interesting group of records that I worked with was in St. Louis with the Philippine archives. This was a collection of about 1,000 cubic feet of material accumulated by the Army in the Philippines during World War II. It was in an open space in the component of the Army that shared space with NPRC in St. Louis and it legally belonged to the Army.

And my colleague Patty and I had to appraise the records to see what actually was there and what its value was. There was a lot of administrative stuff, there were lots of things on Douglas MacArthur, which was exciting the first few times. And the most interesting things were records created by the soldiers. A lot of them had kept diaries and a number of those had been preserved and so we got to see the soldiers' view of what was going on in the Philippines during the war.

And related to that were the POW records. These were records that were kept by the POWs, by American POWs in Japanese POW camps, and they felt the need to document what was going on, and so they used whatever scrap of paper they could find to keep records. Some of these were medical records, some were administrative things, some were just documentation of what the Japanese were doing, who was being killed, who was being executed.

And just as our favorite example, the kinds of paper that they used, they would occasionally get Red Cross cartons of supplies and those included milk cans. And they would use the back of the milk can labels to create records and these were saved. A lot of the things were buried, were put in bottles or some kind of metal container and buried in the POW camps and then when the Japanese were defeated in the Philippines, the POWs went back and dug them up and they gave them to the military. And the military kept these and we thought these were just amazing. Even though the data itself had been put into other forms, into regular recordkeeping systems, we kept the milk can labels as just an example of

these are records that show in themselves how important it was to keep records. And then for how important the records are.

Another part of the collection were the guerilla recognition files. After World War II, a lot of Philippine groups or individuals claimed that they had fought against the Japanese for the Americans, and some were real, some were not. You know, some were legitimate. And so the Army sent in groups to evaluate the legitimacy of the guerilla claims. And there were probably 100 or 200 cubic feet of these files. And included in them were the claims by Ferdinand Marcos for his guerilla record. One of his claims to fame as he rose to become dictator was that he was a guerilla fighter. And his opposition said, no, he wasn't, that this was, this was a sham.

And so we kept getting requests to look for them and we later found out that they never gave us the right name. And when we finally did get the right name, we found the record, his file right away, and indeed it was a sham. The Army determined that he was not a guerilla fighter, that he was just doing it for the money.

And, you know, our immediate reaction was he was told that they were helping to bring him down. And so we went to the Assistant Director for Military Records and showed him and he of course got excited. And then somebody said that technically these are not our records. They still belong to the Army. The 258 had not been done yet. And we were unclear as to whether the Privacy Act applied to foreign dictators. And so a call was made to Washington and these records, which had been in open areas in the Army part of the building for decades, were all of a sudden classified. And so they were in our vault and nobody could look at them.

And they got sent to Washington to the National Archives, and I think it was about a year later a reporter found the guerilla file. Since Patty and I were the archivists which did the appraisal report, he tried calling us and he ended up talking to me. And I was very honest about what the record showed, that Marcos was a fake, and it was in the paper the next morning. And the next morning I also got called in to our Director's office and learned that one should never talk to the press without clearing it first through our Public Affairs office. So it was an important lesson, but, more importantly, the records themselves were just amazing and probably one of the high points of my NARA career.

Court case files have been an issue for the National Archives since at least the 1980s. I know there were many meetings between the courts and NARA in the late '70s/early '80s trying to figure out what to do with case files. And NARA attempted various times to deal with case files.

And it seemed to be going along well and then priorities changed and it was dropped. And it came up again in the early 2000s, for the most part because we were now charging the courts for storage. Once they were paid, the courts really wanted to get something done with their close to two million cubic feet of case files, of civil, criminal, and bankruptcy that were in the Records Centers.

And in the mid-2000s another team was set up to work on this different parts of our first, and I'm blanking on the letter designations, but NW, which is based in Washington, said that they would do it and then they didn't follow through and so Tom Mills and the office of field records would do it. And since I had experience working on the project in the '90s, Tom asked if I would work on this. And, you know, so I volunteered, or was volunteered to do this and it became a major part of my NARA career since then.

You know, first we did the civil cases and we came up with a fairly elaborate way of appraising and looking at having people around the country from both Archives and Records Management to look at every record and case files from every suit code and make a determination by suit code of the value of the records. And it ended up being about 30 suit codes that were permanent in their entirety. Another 30 or so were permanent if they reached a certain stage in the court process. And the remainder were disposable.

And so we kept things like civil rights cases and death penalty cases and environmental cases. And then other cases like medical malpractice, if they reached a certain stage, were decided were significant. And so it ended up being about, oh, 18 or 19% of actual cases were being saved but, in terms of volume, because we were saving things that were significant and once they reached a certain stage in the process, many more documents, much more documentation, and we ended up saving about 40% of the total volume of records.

So of the 600,000 cubic feet of civil case files, we're saving over 200,000 cubic feet. These case files had all been scheduled for disposal before our appraisal. And so, even though we ran into some public relations difficulties, people saying, "Oh, you're destroying things that should be permanent" in actual fact we were saving a lot of things that had previously been scheduled as disposable and would have been destroyed.

MR. KABREL: Are there any examples of that that you can think of?

MR. KABAKOFF: A lot of civil rights cases and certainly the environmental cases and Freedom of Information Act cases. These were all going to be destroyed because they didn't reach the trial stage, which heretofore had been the other kinds of cases that were destroyed.

And as part of our process for determining how to do the appraisal we worked with a lot of law professors. And one of the law professors pointed out that a trial determines what happens factually, or what happened in a particular case factually. What happens before the trial is often what determines what kinds of issues are significant and what kinds of issues should be looked at. So it's not an issue of did somebody commit a particular deed, but was the commission of that deed itself an important thing to have as part of our history?

And in fact some are explained there further. We're pointing that out because then that became a really good pointing factor in how we look at things, that the trial itself isn't necessarily a factor in whether something should be permanent, even though we did continue that because the court wanted all trial cases to be kept. But we ended up saving for research just a huge amount of material on significant issues of our time that would have been destroyed otherwise. And so I think that that's a significant accomplishment.

So we worked really closely with the Record Centers system and I ended up writing the procedures for doing the screening of case files. And working closely with the courts, so the courts with their databases were able to send us lists of all cases by suit code and identify which cases were in the suit code that were significant. Suit codes that are permanent or, in those suit codes, you know, those cases that reach a particular stage in the court process in the other suit codes.

So we're able to really pick out every case that had been determined to be part of the permanent collection. And there were errors. There were court errors on the Record Center side, but probably we

have gotten well over 90% of all those case files that were appraised as permanent. And because we weren't looking for specific cases but samples of what do civil rights cases show? And what do environment cases show? You know, what do they document? What was going on in the country that was important that shows up in the cases?

MR. KABREL: So in some ways you had to think like a researcher?

MR. KABAKOFF: Oh, yes. Yeah, and that's why it was important to work with the legal community and with stakeholders. Now with NARA so much as within the research community, and then we followed that same ideal when we started with the bankruptcy case files. Bankruptcy case files are voluminous, we had a million cubic feet. And we weren't sure how to approach it.

And again, this was something that happened over the decades. NARA had tried different approaches and in the '90s we tried sampling them. There were two approaches that started in the '90s, one that we looked at every case and had parameters set up to see what cases were significant based on whether it was a major industry or the amount of money involved in the bankruptcy or issues like that.

And then there was the Atlanta approach, which said you needed to have a certain number for a comparative sample. And they decided it would be something like 1,000 cases per court per decade, or per district per decade. And we actually tried it here in Boston, what we did was a combination of the two. We looked at every case because we didn't want to miss the historically significant cases, but we also in addition to those cases we also did the sampling.

The sampling was kind of based on the Atlanta method but because bankruptcy courts do not retire things by decade. And so you have transfers that are '58 to '63 or cases that came in later, so there was no way of getting an actual run of 1950 through 1959 of every case where you could pick out, you do, in every 1,500 cases you'd take one. That was not possible from the way the courts would actually retire records.

In the real world, the Atlanta sample didn't work, but we did attempt to do that as best we could. And then combining that with looking for historically significant cases based on what industries were important in New England and the significance of any, or a monetary level that we thought were significant.

And so we did that in the '90s for some courts and then, again, as with NARA, the priorities shifted, and we stopped doing it. And as it turned out, very few Records Centers actually went through that process. We were one of the few that did it. And it had turned out that Atlanta was not one of them. Not to attack Atlanta, but that was a sore point.

Anyway, so after we finished the civil case file appraisal, we went on to the bankruptcy and this got very involved. We ended up trying to see how bankruptcy case files were used. We had done this to some extent with civil but we did it more deeply with bankruptcy because we knew we wanted to do a sample and we didn't know how to do that.

And so we ended up looking at articles and actually talking with and contacting a lot of experts in bankruptcy, law professors, historians, economic historians, researchers. You know, we went to them to see if, "How do you do, how do you do a sample?" And one of the things we looked at were Elizabeth

Warren's books on bankruptcy, she being one of the important experts on bankruptcy and how it affects people.

And she did three different samples a decade apart using a 1% sample per court in given districts for a year. And, I'm sorry; it was a 2.5% sample. So we came up with a couple of possibilities of doing a 2.5% sample of a court every ten years or, you know, we tried different things. So we went to the law professors who were experts about this and based on their input, we ended up coming up with a 2.5% sample per district per year.

If we did it every ten years we would miss things like the depression of 2000, say, or the almost depression of 2006, 2007, 2008. You know, if we'd only did 2001 and 2010 we might have missed that. So getting records from each court each year would ensure that we didn't miss anything.

And we were told a 2.5% sample would be sufficient. And so we ended up doing that. The courts first picked out, you know, their historically significant cases, so we went through those. And so we ran up the appraisal based on the 2.5% sample of the courts per year and that was accepted both by NARA and by the stakeholder community.

And so we started doing that and it ended up being about a 4% sample just because 2.5% accurate sample of every 100 boxes would be easy to do but courts don't retire things in 100 box segments. And so we wanted to make sure that we got something from every year, so if somebody retired 20 boxes for any given year, we'd take one of those boxes. And so it ended up being a higher percentage.

And so once the bankruptcy appraisal got done, we then moved on to criminal and did the criminal appraisal and, again, we did that similar to the civil where certain suit codes were selected as being significant and we would keep all those cases. So anything relating to treason or terrorism would be kept.

MR. KABREL: I think it's important information.

MR. KABAKOFF: Yeah. And that's been a major part of my career for the past ten years. The other one of the other major parts of my career was working with the National Park Service and there's a whole history of that with NARA and the Park Service have not always gotten along very well.

Part of it is that we have competing missions. You know, we both have to preserve historic records. We do the records ourselves. The Park Service has to preserve historic sites and, in order for them to do that, at least for part of the job, they need documentation of what went into an historical site.

MR. KABREL: Can you give us an example of that?

MR. KABAKOFF: Yeah. The Park Service is responsible for historic buildings. And so, for example, at the Boston Navy Yard, the Navy turned it over to the Park Service, so the Park Service is responsible for documenting what was done at the Navy Yard so that they can present that information to the public. And they're also responsible for preserving the different buildings that are still at the Navy Yard. And to do that they need records.

And some of those records of what the Navy did at the Park Service or how they were built, are also things that should be in the National Archives. And so there have been competing interests over the years with NPS complaining that NARA wants to steal their records and they won't be able to do their

work, and NARA complaining that our mission is to hold all the historic records of the nation and NPS is not taking over what should be in the National Archives. And so that's been an issue.

And I've been working with the Park Service for probably at least 20 years. I started out just working locally and Liz is the archivist for the Northeast Region but based in Boston. And so we started working together, and one of the things Liz taught me is the importance of records that NARA does not consider important. You know, things like contracts.

And so if they have an historic house, say, in Concord, documenting the upcoming Patriot's Day, and then the start of the American Revolution, they need to keep that house looking the way it looked in 1775. And so they have to keep records of what the house looked like, when the house was restored, what kinds of things were used to restore it, what the gardens looked like, so that the gardens can be recreated to look the way they looked in 1775.

And so those records are vital for NPS to accomplish its mission. And a lot of that stuff actually NARA doesn't care about. We don't want records of what paint they bought or paint samples. And so it's fine for NPS to keep that.

There's some crossover of, you know, things that are important both to the National Archives and for the National Park Service. And in some of those cases we can make copies, and so when we redid the National Park Service schedule into a big bucket schedule we indicated that there are some things where NARA should have a copy and NPS should have a copy.

And that's worked out here. I'm not sure if it's worked out quite as well in other places. It's certainly much harder with not having a lot of records to make copies. But it's still very doable. We did it when we went out to Acadia National Park. I spent a couple of weeks with the Park Service looking at records of the Naval Security Group activity at Winter Harbor, which was closing and giving the land back to the Park Service.

And so the records of the Navy's time in what was Acadia National Park from 1930 through 2000, you know, some of the records there were Navy records. Some of them belonged at the National Archives, but some of the records are also needed by the Park Service to maintain and interpret what the Navy did out at Winter Harbor. And so copies were made and they have a set and we have a set. And it's worked out really well.

We did the same thing at the Lowell Historic Preservation Commission, where the National Park Service is still responsible for some of the buildings, and NARA also wanted the records of some of the buildings. And so they made copies and so we have a set and they have a set. And it works.

With electronic records, it's certainly much easier to have a digital copy than to send a copy to the National Archives, and then they keep a copy. So I think as time goes by that the kinds of things where we have our set of records and they have their set is going to be much more manageable.

And locally, with the Park Service, we have a really good relationship, and a lot of our relations with Federal agencies, a lot of it's based on how we get along with them. And so if we go in with an attitude of, oh, we can work together to resolve this as opposed to going in with an attitude of "These are NARA's records, you have to give them to us now," we're going to get a lot further.

And so by having some really good friends in the Park Service who will continue to be good friends after I retire, and certainly after they retire, because we've developed these relationships that have led to getting records to the National Archives.

The National Register is one of the Park Service's what they call one of their crown jewels, the National Register of Historic Places. You know, every significant historical place within the United States is listed on the National Register and they have case files for every, every site.

And they offered these to the National Archives. They were going to give us both the paper to use as an archival copy, but they were also going to pay for digitization of the records, give us a digital copy that we could use for reference. And the National Archives' response was we only wanted the electronic copy. We don't want the paper.

And the Park Service was fine with that. And there were issues getting this going, some within NARA, some within the Park Service, but it eventually got approved. This is a huge project for the Federal Records Center system, which is doing the digitization. It's a \$3.5 million project and one of my friends, from the Park Service, is involved, she's the project manager.

And it helped moving all the case files from Washington to the Fort Worth Record Center so they could be state-by-state sent to Tucson to be arranged for scanning with all of the metadata created and then go back to Fort Worth for the actual scanning and then transferred to ERA. So several states have been set down for scanning. Once they have been scanned, it's about getting ready to be transferred. And it's been a huge undertaking.

When I was in Washington for SAA, I stayed a few extra days just to be in at the beginning of the packing up of the National Register records in Washington. And there they created this video with the National Register folks, some of whom were not happy that they were not going to be in charge of the digitization, which they actually tried and failed at. And so that's going well.

And because of that project and because of our relationships with the Park Service, the Park Service has a number of other records that they want to digitize and they want NARA to digitize and then they will come into ERA and eventually go into OPA, including records relating to Little Big Horn, records of National Historical Landmarks, which is a different project, and so it's been fun working with NPS and these are hugely significant records that will finally come into the National Archives.

And I've worked with and had fun with working a lot with EPA, working with the Coast Guard. Locally it's been fun. The Coast Guard nationally has not been. But just one of the things that has an AMD sheet that we had to do in the '90s was to go through and see what was unscheduled in the Records Center and then go ahead and schedule that.

And so it was just finding odd things that were unscheduled and getting them scheduled. So there were Fish and Wildlife records, Corps of Engineer records, Coast Guard stuff. There was this one set of Immigration and Naturalization records that were fascinating. It was just about five feet of records of the INS looking at potentially subversive organizations and people relating who were part of those organizations to see if they should get citizenship or should not enter the country.

And so you had the INS viewpoint on these organizations. They'd been retired as just regular A files, but obviously were not. They were investigations and were interesting to the Archives. There were records

of the Selective Service system from the 1960s, just administrative records, and having been at the agency and having gone through the Selective Service system in the 1960s, sorry, did I say, records from the '60s or '80s?

MR. KABREL: '60s.

MR. KABAKOFF: Oh. Yeah, I was certainly eager to see what the Selective Service was doing from an administrative point of view. And some of the records related to how they reacted to anti-war demonstrations and draft-card burnings. And since I was involved in some of those demonstrations it was kind of fun looking at it from the other side. And, yeah, so they appraised those records as permanent, because it was such a significant time in our history.

Looking at U.S. Attorney's files, there was a period when U.S. Attorneys were just not doing a good job designating historically significant cases. And if you have a look at records before they were destroyed, and I was looking at a group of U.S. Attorney's files that were ready to go to the recycle mill and just check and see what they were, and came across the Dryden v. Nixon case, which was Congressman Dryden suing President Nixon for the illegal invasion of Cambodia in 1970.

And they were going to throw it out and so I saved it and called the U.S. Attorney's Office and they said it didn't go to trial so it's not important. So we realized that the attorneys had a very different, a very legalistic view of what was historically significant than NARA had.

And so we started going through U.S. Attorney's files before they were thrown out and somebody from the Archives and I would spend hours looking at every case and picking out a lot of fascinating cases. So that was fun, but incredibly time-consuming and there had to be a better way which we're still trying to work out, you know, 20 years later.

So it's, you know, a lot of the good things have been with working with Federal agencies. And then working on relations again within our facility here where, relations of the Records Center, Records Management and Archives are probably better than they are at most places, and have always been, you know, historically, back in the Archives in the 1980s.

Yeah, there were some difficulties, but for the most part we were committed very well. And that was, that was a very good thing.

MR. KABREL: Now, let me ask a follow-up question. How important do you feel it is for an archivist, an appraisal archivist or anybody working in the National Archives, to have a general and basic history of their country, of national events and the history of their regional area? I mean, how has that impacted you? And you've described some things but overall how did that impact you in your performance as an archivist?

MR. KABAKOFF: I think it's really important, particularly in appraisal. You know, I'm not sure if I was just doing with working with computers or it wouldn't be as important, but when doing appraisal of, I'm sure for giving reference is also important.

But understanding the important events nationally makes you more aware of what is important, how things should be documented and what things should be documented. And so, just a story, like with Selective Service System, sometime in the '90s the Selective Service System wanted to destroy all of its records from the 1960s and '70s.

And the appraisal archivist, a very nice person, young, hadn't lived through the '60s; he approved it and sent it around for comment. And at that time, because all the field units were involved, you know, it came around to all the field units for comment and those of us, both in Washington and in the field, who lived through the '60s, said no, you cannot do this. You cannot let them destroy these records. And the poor guy just got inundated with negative comments and, but he hadn't lived through it and he wasn't aware of the significance of the Selective Service to the 1960s and early '70s.

And so that lack of awareness would have led to the destruction of some really significant records. So being aware of what's going on, being aware of the civil rights movement for the imports of that, being aware of the environmental movement and environment and climate change, which does exist.

I mean, we have records here. One of the other great collections that we have is from the Woods Hole Laboratory of the National Marine Fisheries Service, and so we have records of fish statistics, of quantity and sizes of fish, all species of fish going back to the 1880s. And so we have a continuous running, a hundred, more than 100 years of records of fish.

And that contains so much about climate change and how fish populations vary and overfishing and all of that. And if you're not aware of that, then you wouldn't think the records are important. Or keeping records of, we have records that include the old weather observatory going back to the late 19th century also. And so, again, another way of documenting climate change.

So if you're not aware of those kinds of things or, I now believe we were missing the importance of certain kinds of records of labor. And there's so much that has occurred over the past 50/60 years that the records are, yeah, some of them have already been appraised, but a lot of them are still being appraised or re-appraised. And not having the knowledge of that is a detriment to doing appropriate appraisal.

And then locally, when we were doing the U.S. Attorney's files, we got to know the names of all of the Mafia families in New England, so if we saw a patriarch, we knew it was Mafia, we knew it was important, and so we kept it. There was a case involving some corruption thing in Medford that was referenced by—

MR. KABREL: Medford, Massachusetts?

MR. KABAKOFF: Medford, Massachusetts, yeah, and we didn't know that but we thought, yeah, it looked really interesting. And so we asked the Archives Director, who lived in Medford, and he said, "Oh, my God. You've got to keep that." Yeah. And that was such a huge part of local history. We found the record of the whole FBI/U.S. Attorney's investigation of Catherine White. That was huge locally. Nationally, it probably wasn't important, but locally it is really significant because it was an overreach by FBI and U.S. Attorneys.

And nothing ever came of it except a lot of bad publicity initially for White and therefore the Government. And so we kept that. So not having a knowledge of local history, again, can make an appraisal and selecting significant cases difficult because we've learned we can't always rely on the agencies to figure out what's significant.

MR. KABREL: Okay. Is this part of discovery, is this one of the aspects of the job that you enjoy the most?

MR. KABAKOFF: Yeah. When I was working on my Ph.D. the best part was actually the hands-on part with the records. And a year after I'd done all my research and had to go back and write my dissertation, that was painful, that was difficult, but looking at the records, that's great.

And so the good part of my job was actually the hands-on work with records, be that court records or Park Service or Coast Guard or whatever. But actually, you know, looking at the records themselves rather than, trying to make a decision without looking at the records or, or being involved in some aspect of the National Archives that doesn't relate directly to the records, yeah, the records, it's fun.

MR. KABREL: And I think your background as a historian must have helped you when it came to making decisions about records, what is significant, what isn't significant. And looking at it all through a researcher's perspective.

MR. KABAKOFF: Right, because I had spent several years as a researcher working on the dissertation, so yeah, trying to figure out stuff. So I had the researcher background to know what kinds of things as an archivist, I should be looking at for researchers to make sure that we have them.

MR. KABREL: You've just talked about a lot of the most interesting projects that you had or some of the discoveries that you've made throughout your career with the National Archives. Is there any other projects or anything else that maybe doesn't necessarily rise to that significance, but that you found to be very rewarding in your career with the National Archives?

MR. KABAKOFF: Yeah. One of the things I really liked about my job is that it varies; I'm not doing one thing all the time. Yeah, I'm doing appraisal, I'm working on an agency schedule or done reference work. When I was in St. Louis, we were doing exhibits and reference and appraisal and just all sorts of things.

Here, as A&D Chief, I worked on overseeing everything coming into the building and everything going out, in addition to doing appraisal, also doing training. One of the things I was, as A&D Chief, the former, when we had a regional administrator, the former administrator was very active in the Federal Executive Board of Greater Boston. And actually that goes back into the late '80s.

And probably 1989 or 1990, the Federal Executive Board set up an AIDS taskforce to work on training Federal employees and educating them on what that is. And the Director of, the FIC Director asked if I'd be interested in being on it. And I said yes. And that was so amazing to me, that NARA was, that part of my job at NARA was to be doing AIDS education. That was cool. That was amazing.

And growing up in a period where doing anything that identified you as gay was, you certainly couldn't do it, and my first few years at NARA I was very much in the closet. To come to a point where I could be, you know, open and actually essentially get paid by the Government to train, to teach Federal employees about AIDS and about what was really happening and about how to prevent the spread of AIDS and what the real risks were.

And that was astonishing and just, it gave me a really good feeling certainly about NARA and about the staff here and about my bosses that they would not only allow me to do this but, essentially ask me to do it. So that was great.

And that's an aspect of life at NARA that probably doesn't get mentioned often because it's not part of our regular job, and I don't know if people are still doing that kind of work now with the Federal

Discussion Report. You know, we're doing some things with COOP, but not major involvement as we did in the past.

But that was an important thing and part of keeping employees happy, keeping me happy. But also part of the varied routine that we had and that we continue to have where we can do lots of different things, all part of NARA's mission and all important, but ensuring that our work does not get monotonous and doesn't get routine.

MR. KABREL: Okay. In your career, what are some of the challenges and issues that you faced in your career? Not necessarily for the future we're talking here. We're talking about in your long career with the National Archives; what are some of the challenges that you, initially that you may have faced?

MR. KABAKOFF: Oh—

MR. KABREL: I mean, it can be very broad, but I understand that. But if you can just narrow it down to certain issues, whether it be technology, whether it be issues of too much, too little, as far as Archives go, what would you think the challenges that you had faced in your years? And how maybe have they evolved? I mean, that might be a better way to approach it.

MR. KABAKOFF: Yeah. Probably the major challenge has been when I joined NARA we were basically, we were paper and only paper. There were during our training back in the late '70s, we were shown things like laser disks and we were shown the computer areas.

And I'm trying to think of the older names, you know, automated data and all that. And then we heard the stories about like the NASA tapes that NARA had, that we didn't know what they were. We knew that they were significant but we couldn't read them. And so we were holding on to them, you know, hoping that eventually somebody would figure out how to read them.

But they were NASA and I think there were also some Navy tapes. And so, being at NARA during the change, there was a huge change in technology from paper to electronic. And that's been, probably the major challenge not being particularly a techie and not having any prior interest in computers, it's personally it's been, you know, a challenge trying to figure out what do I need to know and how do I find it out? And how do I deal with the emerging technologies?

You know, when I was doing my dissertation, I actually had to have a friend write the program. And I did the punch cards though. Shows how long ago that was. But that was the extent of my interaction with computers. Oh, and my history department had to rent time for me at the computer lab for me to go in and do the punch cards on the program. Isn't that amazing? Of course it doesn't really seem that long ago, but it is.

So dealing with the technological issues and, both in how NARA leaves in and maintains records, but also educating agencies. You know, e-mail certainly is an ongoing issue.

MR. KABREL: Has your views on temporary and permanent records changed due to the emerging technology? How have your views on saving records, what is a record, processing, whether it be processing or appraising of records, have they changed with the emerging technology?

MR. KABAKOFF: Not really, although I could see different possibilities. For example anything that is permanent in paper is going to be permanent electronically. You know, I still believe in that.

However, there are things that are useless in paper that have, that could be much more valuable and permanent electronically just because they could be, they're so much more easily manipulated. They can be repurposed. If you have 50,000 special orders of the Army that have gone from being, they put everything, they put six years in and 15 years in unscheduled. Individually, you couldn't do anything like that. If they're all electronic, you could find patterns; they would be much more valuable as a resource.

You know, even with financial records, which are, you know, usually pretty restless. You know, again, electronically you could much more easily and quickly get information out of them. Not that they would necessarily be permanent, but some of the results might be permanent and things that you could not get in any other way because the staff hours it would take to go through them in an analog fashion would be just impossible. And so there are things, you know, electronically that have a lot more value.

With the huge amounts of data that we're getting now, it's always a question of do you look at the data in the same way or is it easier to just bring in everything and then develop faster and better search engines? Is storage cheap enough where it might be easier for NARA to just take all electronic records the Government creates and spend their money on search engines and huge servers to get this done?

And that's actually been mentioned, I've been on sessions talking of the issues. It might be easier to do that rather than go through the appraisal process. I have doubts about spending most of my career as an appraiser and actually having spent five years teaching appraisal, that when you take everything, then it's almost like taking nothing. That you're not making any decisions.

And one of the roles of the archivist is to make decisions on what's important and what's not important. And so, by taking everything in, you make it harder to find what really is important. Even if you have good search engines, it's, you know. If you do a Google search, which Google has or has access to all data in the world, and so you run a search and you get 5,000 pages of responses. Theoretically, the one, the first page that will be the most relevant, but not always.

And it would take you years to get through all of that pages, filing away your report. So if you take in everything, I'm not sure that's the appropriate way for the National Archives to go. Yes, it would be easy, but I don't know if it would be right, you know?

MR. KABREL: So when you were starting out with the National Archives many years ago, we've come full circle in the sense that we have these paper records and now we're up upon the challenges of electronic records. That also brings up the question of space within the National Archives and I know you've been interested in that as well.

MR. KABAKOFF: Yes.

MR. KABREL: And space as it pertains to permanent records in the Archives. Federal records are dealing with their own issues of space. But just on, as what you've seen and not looking so much into the future, how do you see the space issues presently as we're dealing with? How do you see that as something that would benefit the National Archives?

MR. KABAKOFF: Yeah, certainly if we digitized everything, it would be a lot easier. But that's just not realistic. We don't have the budget to. It's all well and good to say, oh, we're just going to go ahead and digitize. We don't have the budget to do it. We'll never have the budget to do it. We're in archives. We're at the bottom of the heap in terms of budget appropriations.

When I was still at NPRC and the National Archives budget was something like \$100 million or, I don't know, \$150 million, and there was an article in the paper in the news saying that two fighter planes having fallen off an aircraft carrier. It was like, "Oh, my God. That's the National Archives budget right there."

And so the idea of us ever having enough money to digitize everything in our holdings is just, it's just not possible. And so, when I think about being in records, if something is historically significant, it should come to NARA. Space, we shouldn't be telling the agencies "Oh, we don't have space so we can't take it. You know, sorry."

It's our job. It's our mission to take that to do that and we need to find space. And I'm not sure of the best ways of doing it. Certainly we can digitize some and destroy the hard copy, which is anathema to some archivists. We can't, we can't say that, you know, we've reached the limits of our space; our footprint can't grow. We have to make it grow, one way or another. Yeah, we send a crew out to Kansas City with shovels and then take out more space, I'm not sure.

MR. KABREL: Well, these challenges are certainly different than when you faced the challenges that you faced in 1977. And we'll talk more about these when we look at some of the challenges that will be facing NARA later on in this interview.

Before we get too far into that, I just wanted to bring this back briefly to how you move from unit to unit in the National Archives. I know the National Archives tends to change things. The nature of your work changes through presidential administrations, right, or through different directors. Can you just name a few of the directors that you worked for and how maybe briefly touch upon how your work maybe changed during the course of that?

MR. KABAKOFF: Actually, to be honest, the local directors have not had that much of an influence. Other than St. Louis. When I was working in the Philippine Archives, the director called Patty and me into his office and yelled at us because, reprimanded us because we were having too much fun, that we were enjoying our work too much, and that was just totally amazing.

And that's where we were just talking about smiling and all, you know, telling other people how good the records were, although we thought that was part of our job, spreading the word out on significant records.

So when he left it was a lot better and when we finished, we got an award from his successor, which was used new chairs that we had gotten from some of the Army. They had bought new furniture and so we got their old stuff, so Patty and I got new chairs and that was great, which was a lot better than being told we're having too much fun.

Nationally, the change in Archivists hasn't been that significant. There have been different emphases on where we go. You know, sometimes more emphasis on public programs, sometimes more emphasis on, you know, process. But at my level it hasn't had that much of an effect.

The biggest thing was when we got our freedom from, from GSA.

MR. KABREL: What year was that?

MR. KABAKOFF: 1985. 20th anniversary this year. We should celebrate it. Thirty, thank you. Math has never been my strong point. But, which is part of the thing with computers.

But anyway, GSA always, we always felt we were restricted and we had to be really careful on what we were doing. And NARA, or back then NAS, the National Archives and Records Service was—

MR. KABREL: So it was called NARS at the time?

MR. KABAKOFF: Yeah, it was. From 1949 through '85. We were NARSians. Sorry. We were. That was, that was the term.

GSA was kept. We weren't sure how they would react to, or how careful we had to be with identifying the records because they had to, you know, approve everything. I mean, they didn't do the appraisal and we don't think they looked at the appraisals, but they actually tended to be pretty conservative, certainly during the Reagan years.

There were some pretty conservative, you know, actually some pretty corrupt people who were heads of GSA, or involved with GSA. And even going back to the whole thing with the Nixon papers with Nixon and Sampson, you know, we never really trusted GSA.

They didn't have any historical sense and we were very aware of that then. And they thought of NARA, or NARS, as, you know, we were a warehouse for records and that's all we were. And so by getting our freedom we felt that we had, you know, a lot more latitude in what we were doing and how we could talk about what we were doing. So that was a major shift, and a really important one for us.

And I guess the other thing would be, with records management, with, under Carlin, of being more proactive with Federal agencies, which I think we were doing here in Boston and probably in the regions. It's something other regions, and so we were doing it anyway, but he had more of a greater emphasis on reaching out to the agencies. And so I think that was important. And it had been a noble shift.

MR. KABREL: Do you feel that Carlin had a greater, was more, since he was not really an archivist, I have heard that people felt that he was able to help the National Archives politically.

MR. KABAKOFF: Yes. Yes. Yeah, he wasn't an archivist but he was able to get us money. And that was, he was a politician and he was able to work with, I don't know, I guess with Congress and he was much better on our budget than anybody before or after. And that was a big help.

MR. KABREL: Now that we've spoken a lot about your time with the National Archives from the very beginning to the present and a lot of the major projects and significant projects that you had a part of, I'd like to ask you how you envision the future of the National Archives.

And I know we've touched on it briefly before, but if you'd like to expand upon that answer a little bit, how do you see the National Archives going forth from 2015 into the next maybe 10, 20, 30 years into the future?

MR. KABAKOFF: I think NARA has to get a better handle on electronic records and electronic recordkeeping. And there's different aspects to that.

One is there's still a lot of analog records out there that should be part of the National Archives. And we keep saying we don't have space and so we need to come up with alternatives. And I think we need to revisit the question of affiliated archives.

There are a lot of agencies that they're going ahead and doing it anyway. So the National Park Service has been getting private money to build archives. And so we're ending up with unaffiliated archives, and we need to take the next step and say, and work with the agency rather than just telling them "You can't do this. The records belong with us." They're not going to listen. We have no enforcement power.

And so, essentially, we need to make nice with the agencies and say if you want to, if you have the money and you can set up an affiliated archive, we will work with you. We'll have legal ownership, you'll have physical ownership and we'll work with you to make sure that you're keeping, that you're taking good care of the records and making them available to the public.

And that's one way of essentially gaining space since other ways don't seem to be working. We should try harder, perhaps, on that.

We also need to make NARA more user friendly for the agencies and for internal stuff with. I certainly had my issues with ERA, particularly when I've lost an agency schedule that was being worked on. But a lot of agencies are really, they like the concept of ERA but they complain about the user friendliness of it. So that needs to be approved as well as certainly the capacity of ERA.

And of OPA, because it's not only important to bring in the records, the electronic records into the National Archives but we need to be able to make them available to the public and that's the point. It's why we exist. And so just having ERA without the public access component or really good public access component is not sufficient. So we have to work to improve that.

And I know the folks in ERA and in OPA who worked with the National Park Service on the National Register, they've been great. But one of the issues was just having the capacity to handle the huge amount of data coming in. And so we have to improve that.

I'm trying to think of other issues. We need to become more agency friendly. The agencies are not our opponents or our enemies or our rivals; they're our allies, and so we need to improve our relations with them. In some cases we do really well, but in other cases we have, in a case that we have people in the National Archives at high levels who don't do a good job of dealing with other agencies. And that's a problem and we need to address that.

MR. KABREL: How do you see the future of the regional archives within the National Archives itself?

MR. KABAKOFF: Regional archives were first organized in the late 1960s to ensure that you don't have to go to Washington to visit the National Archives, which was good for a long time; I haven't seen it recently. And perhaps electronically, so it's the National Archives without having to go to Washington. But the Regional Archives are important for maintaining records that pertain to the regions that they're in and so it ensures that the people who are doing research don't have to all go to Washington to find records.

And so if you live in Boston and you want to do research on the Boston Desegregation Case, school desegregation, you don't have to go to Washington to do that. You know, you can just come to Waltham and get the records or get the records of the MIT lab that developed radar in World War II.

You know, or local court cases. You know, all these things that happened locally. The greatest interest is locally, people interested in the Boston Navy Yard or Portsmouth Navy Yard or any of the military facilities or environmental issues in New England that EPO is involved in. Why should they have to go elsewhere? It's much easier than Washington to come to Waltham to get their research done.

One of the agencies that I've worked with is the International Boundary and Water Commission in El Paso and the bulk of their analog records are in Fort Worth, which makes sense because people in Texas have the most involvement with the boundary between the U.S. and Mexico. And why should they have to come to Washington? So I think it makes sense to have Regional Archives.

One of my concerns is that we've cut hours for the public to visit. So, if you work a 9:00 to 5:00 job, you can't come to the Archives. That makes no sense. And then we complain that we're not getting this interest in the Archives. And so I think it's important that we expand staffing, certainly, to be able to do this but expand our outreach to the public and make the hours available.

I was really bothered when the Archives had the affiliates closed because it was very important. If people who want to do research instead of being able to get downtown have to go to the very end of northeast Philadelphia, which is like 18 miles, but can take at rush hour probably an hour and a half. You know, that doesn't make any sense. It doesn't make us user friendly for the public.

The same thing with the Archives in Alaska. Moving the stuff to Seattle and saying, oh, it'll be digitized. Okay. Wait until it's digitized before you move it. The main interest in those, the Alaskan Archives are people in Alaska. They're not people in Seattle.

And so by closing that and then saying, oh, people aren't coming anyway, but you're making it difficult for people to come and then complain that they're not coming and so you close. I think it's really important to have our regional archives, our regional, and not just the archives, but have a regional presence. So have regional records management to work with agencies in the field.

Not every agency is based in Washington and even those agencies that are based in Washington, a lot of them do most of their work in the field. And to not have that presence makes it really difficult for agencies to get assistance. So I think it's a mistake to downgrade the field.

And granted my 37 and a half years have all always been in the field, but it made me really aware of how the field is looked upon by Washington, that we don't do the same work. We're not as important. We're not as significant, blah, blah, blah, and so we don't need the funding or the support.

And yet if you look at Federal agencies, they're in the whole country, yeah, they're not just in Washington. Some agencies have most of their presence outside of Washington. And we need to have staff in the field to deal with the agencies, to work with them to get those records in.

And the Archives doesn't get records by some kind of magic event where all of a sudden all the permanent records appear in Archive space. Yeah. It involves a lot of work by people in records management, by people in appraisal working with the agencies. And work by the agencies to get those records into the record centers and then from the record center to the Archives. And by ignoring that process, we do great harm to ourselves.

MR. KABREL: So you feel that there is still a lot of significant permanent records in the field that record management could retrieve?

MR. KABAKOFF: Oh, yeah. Yeah, without question. Certainly with just locally we have National Park Service records, which are coming in at a decent pace. We have records of Portsmouth Navy Yard from the 19th century that we're still working on getting in without people having direct contact, people in Boston having contact with Portsmouth, we're not going to get those records.

And that's just one example, I'm sure I could come up with a lot of other examples. Not only in New England, but throughout the country.

MR. KABREL: Okay. Is there anything else that you would like to add, any anecdotes or words of wisdom or, so to speak, of anything? And I know it's a pretty broad question again that we're asking of you here, but is there anything else that you'd like to address before we end our interview?

MR. KABAKOFF: Well, I guess just that I didn't grow up saying, gee, when I grow up, I want to be an archivist. And even in college and grad school, I wasn't doing that. I was using archives but I didn't want to be an archivist.

Yeah, I was going to go, you know, teach people, and yet it's a really interesting and rewarding career. And, yeah, so you have fun with the records. It's been great and the people have been great. So, you know, although it was not my initial career path, as it turned out, I'm very happy with it. I'm happy with what I've done.

MR. KABREL: Anything you'd do differently?

MR. KABAKOFF: That's a hard question. Yeah, I'd probably make some different appraisal decisions, but, keep this, throw out that.

MR. KABREL: But as a career move you feel that this was a good direction?

MR. KABAKOFF: Yeah. And I think, yeah, because I've really enjoyed working directly with the records. One of the things in RSA, if you get too many promotions you get separated from actual contact with the records. And sometimes very consciously chosen not to go for a promotion where I'd be doing more management and less records work. And I think that's, for me that's the correct decision.

MR. KABREL: Okay, Marvin. Thank you for your time, thank you for your service.

MR. KABAKOFF: Thank you.

MR. KABREL: Appreciate it, and I'm sure for the record everybody who looks at this recording in the future will come, will come away with a better perspective on the National Archives and certainly a better perspective of you as a human being as well.

MR. KABAKOFF: All right.

MR. KABREL: And this is Jack KABREL interviewing Marvin Kabakoff in Waltham, Massachusetts on April 15, 2015. Marvin's retirement date is on April 24, 2015. Thank you.

[END RECORDING]



NATIONAL ARCHIVES

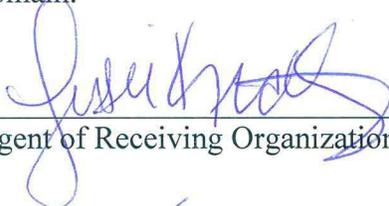
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