

U.S. National Archives and Records Administration
Transcript of National Archives History Office
Oral History Interview
Subject: Nancy Malan
Interviewer: Jennifer Johnson
Date: February 19, 2020

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MS. JENNIFER JOHNSON: My name is Jennifer Johnson. I am conducting an oral history interview for the National Archives and Records Administration with Nancy Malan who retired in 2006. Today's date is February 19th, 2020. Nancy, could you start off by telling some background about your education and/or how you got to NARA?

MS. NANCY MALAN: Yes, sure. I have a Master's degree from Georgetown University. I finished two semesters there. I still had a thesis to write, but I decided that I ought to get a job. My primary professor, Dorothy Brown, suggested I go over to the Archives and talk to Claudine Weir who had some major role. I'm not sure what it was at that time and I went over. I didn't talk to Claudine Weir but I guess I went to personnel and right off the bat they sent me to Still Pictures where I was interviewed by Jim Moore. It's odd that happened then but it wouldn't happen these days. I was a little annoyed because he kept me there all day and I was having exams and I felt like I needed to go study. Nowadays, if you got an all-day interview, you'd be thrilled. At any rate a couple days later I was hired. I had no civil service status. It didn't matter. I started as a technician. I took the civil service exam and I'm not sure when but shortly thereafter I was converted from temporary to civil service and then got into the (Career Intern Development System) CIDs program.

MS. JOHNSON: Can you speak a little about the CIDs program?

MS. MALAN: It was a program where a large number—I'd say probably 15 people—were hired to get into a career ladder. I think it was a GS-7-9-11 position as an archivist. We were assigned to one particular unit. I was assigned to Still Pictures but periodically we were assigned to a different unit where we were to learn the work of that unit. We also took a course on Archives Administration—I think it was called—given by Frank Evans who was just terrific. That program lasted, oh, I'd say somewhere between five and seven years and it was wonderful for history students because it gave us all jobs. Now, I think it's one or two people a year who are hired but that was quite a lot. At that time the idea was to get ready to replace staff who were going to retire and to train them properly. That was the CIDs program.

MS. JOHNSON: You mentioned having a professor recommend you go to the National Archives. What were your impressions of the National Archives as you were beginning your career? Were you aware of the National Archives much when you were doing your school—your classwork at Georgetown?

MS. MALAN: No. Ashamedly, I have to say no. I didn't know a thing about the National Archives. I learned pretty quickly when I got there. But the organization had never come up. I'd never done research there. I just didn't know a thing about it.

MS. JOHNSON: You said you started as an archivist in Still Pictures. Can you describe what a typical day or week looked like for you?

MS. MALAN: Yes. Actually I started as an archives technician. When I finished my degree, I was automatically put into the archivist series and the first thing that I did was reference, responding to letters from the public. The vast majority had to do with citing or providing information to researchers about Navy ships they had served on. Well, this was in writing. Just before I came, we got a huge accession of World War II Navy records, Navy photographic files. The word got out that we had them and veterans all wanted a picture of the ship they served on. There were port side, starboard sides, fore and aft, probably five or six images of every ship in the Navy. So we would go look at them. At that time, we just did a form—a written form, sent it to the person who had written in, and then filled those orders when they came in. I very quickly moved from that, which was a pretty easy research task to answering inquiries about Civil War photographs, about the Farm Security Administration, which of course we didn't have but people thought we did, World War I and World War II photographs generally. And so I with everybody else expanded my experience from the Navy photo files, record group 80, to a broad range.

MS. JOHNSON: Were you involved, or did part of your duties include processing photographs or writing finding aids or did that fall on different staff?

MS. MALAN: No, it did. I worked for a long time on reference both in the research room and then answering written inquiries. Then I did a number of projects. We acquired the Harmon Foundation collection, which was from a private source, of African artists and African American artists and I worked on those. I worked—it's just hard to remember. I processed a lot of different—oh, Forest Service. We got a huge accession of Forest Service photos and those needed to be - - .

MS. JOHNSON: I'm sorry to interrupt. What kind of service?

MS. MALAN: The Forest Service. 1995. And that was also popular—a lot of requests for Forest Service photos. Then I became a supervisor. I supervised both the reference and project staff. At that time, I guess we were a branch. I don't really remember. I got up to supervising both archivists and technicians.

MS. JOHNSON: I discovered across a book that had a chapter authored by you that was described as coming from a National Archives conference. Can you talk a little bit about—I think it was 1976—your presentation “American Women Through the Camera's Eye.”

MS. MALAN: Yes. The conference was announced probably a year before it took place. The Archives at that time had an annual scholarly conference and this one was going to be on women. I'm not sure why I was asked, but I was asked to give a pictorial presentation. A year or two earlier, I had the good fortune of going to a training program run by the American Association for State and Local History (AASLH) on creating slideshows. It was out in Harper's Ferry, run by the Park Service, and it was fantastic. It was—I learned a lot about production, about adding music, about narration, and so I decided to use those skills to create a slideshow rather than an illustrated lecture.

I got Renee Cheney, who was well-known and one of the few female radio broadcasters, to do the narration. I added music to it and came up with the presentation. The book—the photos and the book are based on that presentation. I was let's say—what's the word?...nervous, because when the program came out, I was the last person on the program and I followed Joseph Lash, the well-known author of *Eleanor and Franklin* and several other books. I just thought, oh wow, what an act to follow. But I was absolutely pleased when after the conference was over, Mable Dietrich, who was the head of the Office of the National Archives said to me that she thought that my presentation was one of the highlights of the conference. I was just thrilled. I also was asked to give it to the office heads who had—I guess it was monthly meetings. I did that and people were impressed and there was some applause after. One of the managers said later that it was the best meeting that they had had. So

it was very well-received and I was thrilled to do it, and glad that it came out of the publication. It was kind of a highlight. I—the idea of a slideshow just came to me. I did remember staying at this meeting of the high level management that—I think Jim Moore for allowing me the time to work on it and I remember saying that if he had known how much time I had spent on it, he would not be too happy, and I thought that was pretty funny.

MS. JOHNSON: I'm sure. Are there any other interesting photos or reference requests or discoveries that you made while you worked in Still Pictures?

MS. MALAN: I'll tell you what. I opened the drawer one time and there were artworks and I went through them and there was one signed by Ben Shahn who I recognized as a relatively prominent American artist. I took it out and drew it to people's attention and I thought that was all very cool. I also—I'm the person who found in the Abbey Row—I believe—that RG 79, also Park Service. There's a pretty well-known photo now of Richard Nixon and Elvis Presley. Nixon invited Presley to the White House for a conference on anti-drug—

MS. JOHNSON: Yes. You found that?

MS. MALAN: Yeah, I'm the person who, who found it. The two of them look like vampires really. They're facing the camera and Presley has a cape on and it's just priceless. I unearthed it from the Abbey Row collection.

MS. JOHNSON: That's amazing. Is there anything else about Still Pictures because I understand you then moved to Public Programs.

MS. MALAN: That opportunity arose because the head of the office had seen my slideshow and made me an offer. I had applied for a promotion in Still Pictures and someone else was selected. I was unhappy there. And so I just moved down to Public Programs. What I did there was I supported the Exhibit staff basically. I did slide shows that were part of Exhibits. I did sales items like a selection of postcards. I did an audiotope on World War II. Those are the ones that I remember. It was all using my Still Picture knowledge, my ability to do research in other records based on my experience as an archivist. And it worked out very nicely.

MS. JOHNSON: So, just to make sure I get the dates, you were in Still Pictures. I don't even think I asked you at the beginning. What year were you hired to be an archives technician for Still—

MS. MALAN: Sixty eight. 1968. Same year as the riots.

MS. JOHNSON: Oh, wow. So you were downtown.

MS. MALAN: It was quite a time. It was quite a time. Then I stayed in Still Pictures—let me think—after 1980—I'd say '81, '82 and then I went down to Public Programs. I was very happy about that. So that was the sequence.

MS. JOHNSON: Okay. In my understanding of NARA history, in the middle of your career at NARA, two big events happened in the eighties, RIFs and our transition to independence. Can you talk a little bit about the RIFs?

MS. MALAN: I had been down in Public Programs—I'm not sure—several years at least. I was wholly independent. Everybody else there was part of a staff. There was an Education staff. There was an Exhibit staff. And I was sort of solo. When they had to downsize, I was standing out like a sore thumb. They eliminated my job. It was a devastating thing. It was right at Christmas-time I remember. I didn't want to tell anybody. It was just terrible. I got through Christmas. I discovered or was told that I was going to bump—should I explain what bumping means?

MS. JOHNSON: I think so. Yeah.

MS. MALAN: The way it works is since I had considerable years of public service, I would bump or take a position of someone with less service and that person would be out of a job or would bump somebody else. It just depended on how many years that person—how many years of service that person had. It turned out that I was going to bump a very good friend of mine, John Vernon, who was working at Suitland as an archivist but in the Records Center. By a stroke of good fortune, Jim Moore, who had not selected me for the promotion in Still Pictures saved me from being sent to Suitland. I somehow finagled an opening in Central Reference. I moved into that. Part of the reason was that at the time I was working on a genealogy slideshow, a way to introduce new genealogists to how you went about research, via a slideshow rather than having the staff explain it a hundred times over. That, of course, was a Central Reference function. So it made sense that I would go to Central Reference and finish that project, which I did.

MS. JOHNSON: Do you remember what year it was? You said it was right before Christmas.

MS. MALAN: Eighty five, eighty six. Eighty four. Something like that. Certainly before '89. I know it was well before '89.

MS. JOHNSON: Okay. And I do have to ask. Is this when you had what is still the envy of folks who were around? The office above—was it above the old theater?

MS. MALAN: [Laughs]

MS. JOHNSON: I have heard a lot about this office.

MS. MALAN: Yeah. It was a gem. No. I didn't get into that office until I went from Central Reference to the Regional Archives program with John Scroggins and Roseanne Butler. They had an office up on 13N. There wasn't a lot of room in it. I just looked around and I found this space above the theater, behind the stage. You got up to it by climbing a ladder that was the sort that you would have on a Navy ship. It was this steep metal ladder and it was a mess. I told them could they make an office out of it for me? They said sure. Are you sure you want to be up there? Because it was pretty isolated and I thought it was fantastic. I said yes. In short order they put up drywall. They put in some ducts for heating and air conditioning and painted everything and I moved furniture up that ladder. Well, I mean, I didn't but people helped me. It was big.

It allowed me to do audio/visual programs. I could do audio work without disturbing people. I had enough room to project. I had a screen that I could pull down and put the projector some distance away and I could put the lights out and project slides. It really worked given the job I was doing. Yeah, it was isolating but I really—rarely did I mind—and people would come up. Frank Burke who was the Acting Archivist would show it to people and, you know, this is Nancy's office and she outfitted it all by herself and everybody would get a laugh out of that. Volunteers would come up. At some point Trudy Peterson called me or came up and said are you comfortable here? Jim Moore was long gone and Trudy was the head of the Office of the National Archives. And are you comfortable here? I said, oh yeah, I'm very comfortable. She said, well, okay, because there's been some discussion about you being vulnerable here. I said, no, I certainly didn't feel that way and the whole thing went away. They let me stay and I stayed there until we were moved to Archives Two.

MS. JOHNSON: Okay. Well, but to back up just a little bit before we go into Regional Archives more, do you have any memories or any thoughts about being in the agency when NARA gained independence?

MS. MALAN: To be honest, it was happening at a level that was beyond me. It was not sort of common knowledge, constantly discussed, at least not among my peers. It was great when it happened, but the thing I remember most was that I was asked to work on a letterhead design. We were no longer GSA and we needed our own letterhead. The other thing I remember was that there was a ceremony or some commemoration in which Dick Jacobs sang—who was a very accomplished tenor, I think—sang “The Impossible Dream,” which I frankly thought was a little over the top. But that took place in the Rotunda. Of course from that, you know, life just went on. It obviously was significant but it didn't have a lot of effect on the things that I was doing or my peers were doing other than budget, but we weren't involved in the budget. It was a nice feeling that we were an independent agency. We didn't have to deal with GSA anymore. That didn't have much effect.

MS. JOHNSON: Can you talk a little bit or describe your time when you worked for the Regional Archives, maybe more even once you got to A2 how your office at A2 functioned for the Regional Archives?

MS. MALAN: We were basically support staff. We were a presence for the regents in D.C., which they of course needed because they were out in the field and out of sight out of mind. There were five of us and my job was to support the public programs aspect of the regions. At that time, John Scroggins and Roseanne Butler worked extremely hard to try to get more attention both by the agency and by the public given to each of the Regional Archives, which primarily were used by microfilm researchers. But there were a lot of important records there. The idea was to let the public be aware that those records were there and to encourage research.

And also to encourage the agency management to recognize that a nationwide network of facilities was a very positive aspect of the National Archives and that not very many people knew about it. The management in D.C. never saw it that way. I remember in particular Adrienne Thomas and—what was his name? Steve Hasdat—were very anti-the regional archives and were constantly talking about shutting them down, altering—cutting the budget and John and Roseanne were very, very strong in preventing that from happening. It was a time when part of this idea of getting the Regional Archives better known—part of that was to move them from Record Centers where they were located to more prominent locations. That was both a blessing and a curse. I can't remember—I think Philadelphia was the first one to move from the Record Center to downtown Philadelphia and there was an exhibit space and it was much more convenient for researchers and so forth. The problem was that the agency never really supported those moves. I mean we got away with one or two. Then the house of cards started to fall and that made a very unbalanced program. You couldn't say that the Regional Archives were housed in the Record Centers because some were and some weren't. You couldn't say that they had exhibit space because a few did, but most didn't. It's hard for me to remember. I have a feeling that by now they'd have been eviscerated and the whole idea of really promoting public programs in the regions has gone by the by. That part—the public programs was part of the—what do you call the evaluation of the Regional Director?

MS. JOHNSON: I'm not sure.

MS. MALAN: Some kind of plan. In other words, when you were evaluated, one of the elements of your evaluation—one of the major ones was how you were doing in public programs.

MS. JOHNSON: Oh, the performance review.

MS. MALAN: Performance review. Thank you. Some people like that and some people said, hey, look, I'm an archivist. I'm not a salesperson. Most of them came around and it was terrific for me because that's what I did. They would call me up and they'd say we'd like to do an exhibit and there was a commemoration. I think it was

the 50th anniversary of the first controlled, sustained nuclear reaction in Chicago and all the records were there. The San Francisco earthquake, 1906.

MS. JOHNSON: I think I remember mention of a Brown v. Board as well.

MS. MALAN: Oh, yeah. Board of Education in Kansas City. We had the records for that. There were a lot of commemorations and some regions took the lead and I just helped. Others—I basically did the project for them and it was terrific. I always felt well-received by the staff in the regions. There was no—it was rare—one particular region wasn't too open. But everybody else welcomed me, thanked me for my advice, and I felt very needed and appreciated.

MS. JOHNSON: I do know, it was shortly before you retired, but you had a big role in the exhibit that was put on display in the new building that they built in Morrow, Georgia for the Atlanta region.

MS. MALAN: Right. That was, that was my last big project and you worked on it with me. And that, that was, that was just wonderful. The thing I remember most is that we did a section on prison records. Some federal penitentiary there in Georgia somewhere and we selected individual cases trying to come up with a variety of crimes from petty larceny to murder and everything in between including perpetrators of various races and backgrounds and ages. It came out really nicely and one morning I went in after the exhibit was up and the cleaning staff was looking at those panels saying things like, no, that, that boy was too young to be sent to prison. And really, really responding and I thought if you could get the cleaning staff interesting in the records that was top notch. That made me very, very happy.

MS. JOHNSON: Indeed. It's what the exhibit is meant to do. Isn't it?

MS. MALAN: Right, exactly, yeah. It's not all intellectual stuff and we—another thing in that exhibit, I can't remember in what capacity, but I selected records using the names of staff members. Maybe they weren't relatives to staff members and the names were common. But they did turn up and that was also a big hit. People just loved to see their names and it was, you know, history is not about famous people necessarily. It's about, you know, the common person and that selection drove that point home. So that was a terrific project. That was the last major project I did.

Another part of it you probably remember was the Tuskegee Syphilis Study. Now, that was something that—I mean those records are important and there was some question about whether that subject would be approved. I often wonder whether it would have been approved if it was in D.C. At any rate, there was no problem. I think Jim McSweeney was the Director and he said, oh, absolutely. I found another discovery that I'm proud of. I went to the files and there are all these black and white prints of the people who were part of the study (Tuskegee syphilis study). Then I go to another folder and there are color slides of the same people. We introduced color and I guess nobody had seen them or—I just don't know. All I know is that they were never used and it really added a lot to have the color images.

MS. JOHNSON: I remember that now that you say that because I remember there was one woman who was the nurse for the whole study and you see all these characters that are repeated but they're in color. It just gives the image one more—just a push into more lifelike in some way.

MS. MALAN: Absolutely. It was very neat.

MS. JOHNSON: I know I asked you about the independence, which was big for the agency and then RIFs, which was very high level, but you were personally affected. Are there any other significant turning points in your mind in your career that you'd want to talk about? Significant, either meaning a memorable moment or not so memorable moment?

MS. MALAN: You mean a positive or a negative.

MS. JOHNSON: Yes, thank you.

MS. MALAN: Let me think. I'll tell you what. I think being associated with the American Association for State and Local History (AASLH), which was a natural fit. It wasn't the Society of American Archivists (SAA) but a professional organization and the Archives allowed me to, A) present programs at their workshops about photos and care of photos and so forth. They also allowed me to take some of the classes and one of those classes was the one in Harper's Ferry about making slideshows. That was a major change. I learned a lot. I didn't know anything about it before. I became wildly enthusiastic about making slideshows. They were very well-received.

Then I did an independent study for AASLH on—I forget what it was called. It was basically a course in how to manage a historical photo collection. I used the experience that I had in Still Pictures and I also—I'm sure that I was given some time to work on that. That, too, was well received. I was asked to turn it into a book, which I did not do, which was kind of a mistake, but so it goes. I would say that flexibility at the Archives to allow people to get some additional training was very important to me.

I said the downside, I don't think I'd particularly want to talk about except to say that it was always frustrating to be so invested in the records and in the archival program and to have the management deemphasize that and the role of the archivist in helping researchers in favor of some other priority. It always seemed to me that the management didn't appreciate the importance of having an experienced staff who knew the records and could work with researchers. Furthermore, I have talked to numerous people who did or have done research at the Archives and every last one of them has said how valuable it was to have an archivist who knew the records, work with them, and lead them to specific series or boxes. I rest my case.

MS. JOHNSON: Understood. Well, thank you for sharing that. One last thing. It's impossible to capture—I did the math. From 1968 until you retired in 2006, that would have been 38 years with NARA. Is there anything else you would like to add? Is there something I didn't ask you about or any anecdotes or words of wisdom that you want to share?

MS. MALAN: Well, yeah. One is that when I came there in 1968 the preservation lab was staffed by people who were not trained in conservation largely because there weren't any programs. They were very competent but not like it is now. During the course of my 38 years there I think that was the single most important change in the overall program that people who were trained—conservators, photo conservators, paper conservators— were hired and a great deal of work was done on some very important records that were languishing in the stacks because nobody had the expertise. The lab was staffed both with what I call bench people as well as managers and the Regional Archives were brought in, asked about records that they thought needed work and those records were brought to D.C. and worked on. That was a huge, huge plus in the time I was there.

Another issue I think is that I was always distressed that the Office of Public Programs was dissolved and its functions separated into I don't know what. It does seem to me that the Office of Public Programs was, like, marketing is in the business world and that you need to market because a lot of people just don't know what an archive is or they have a misconception of what it is and that's what Public Programs does. What I'm most proud

of is that I was an educator. I mean I was an archivist but I was an educator and I educated people about what an archive is, how to use it, what interesting records there are, why it's important to have an archive and I think that—I always say that we did a lot of people some good and nobody any harm. And the only anecdote—can I give you two?

MS. JOHNSON: Absolutely.

MS. MALAN: The first one was when I was in the Office of Public Programs, I was asked to do an audiotape of excerpts of audio recordings from World War II. It was a fun, fun project. I listened to tons and tons of reports of battles and those jingles about war bonds and all kinds of stuff. The word got out that the tape was available, but it wasn't. Somebody—somehow or another got my name—some gentleman in Annapolis. I said, you know, it just isn't ready yet, but let me have your name and address and when it's ready I'll send you a copy. It was a while. It was probably six months till it was ready. I kept that note. I sent it to him and I think the guy was astounded that some Federal bureaucrat remembered. I sent it to him gratis. I said, you know, it's comped. This guy sent me a dozen roses to the office. [Laughter] And everybody was looking like, oh, where did those come from and I was too. And I opened the card and it was from this guy who said I appreciate your kindness or your attention to details or something like that. It just drove home that people really do appreciate that somebody, particularly a Federal employee, pays attention to them. I thought it was terrific. A little over the top.

The other thing that I thought was very funny was the anniversary—the 50th anniversary of the National Archives. I did a slideshow for that. It ran continuously, oh boy, it tried to run continuously in the—one of the alcoves in the Exhibit hall. The people who designed the exhibit designed a projection booth that was about 20 feet off the ground because then, you know, it didn't interfere and you project from high and people could sit in front and see it. The problem of course was that when there was maintenance, you had to get a ladder out, open up the trap door, climb up the ladder, and work on the projectors or whatever wasn't working. It was a busy—probably a holiday weekend when I got a call that it wasn't working. I went down, opened the trap door, climbed up on the ladder. It was summer and I had shorts on and I hear a visitor say the—that's what legs looked like 50 years ago. [Laughter] I thought it was terrific.

Other than that I'm proud to have worked there. Like a marriage of 38 years, it had its highs and its lows but on balance it was a wonderful opportunity to provide service to the public. When people ask me, you know, what did you do? I say, well, I had some really important records. For example, I had the Nixon resignation in my hands. I had the George Washington annotated copy of the Constitution. I had the Emancipation Proclamation (EP). I had the instrument of surrender for World War II. They're looking at me, like, wow. It makes me smile and it makes me realize that it was a privilege and a wonderful opportunity to work with those records.

MS. JOHNSON: To me it strikes that argument—I mean it just reinforces what we were saying earlier. You had things like the EP in your hands, but then you also got to witness the cleaning staff appreciate and react to records that don't even register on that level of historic significance.

MS. MALAN: Just exactly. Yeah. So a very neat experience. I never looked back. I left on a Friday. I woke up on Monday morning thinking, oh, this is great. I don't have to go to work. But I certainly don't regret the experience.

MS. JOHNSON: Well, I am deeply appreciative and thank you for taking time to do this oral history interview. I think it's great to add to the collection that NARA is trying to gather. I appreciate your time today.

MS. MALAN: My pleasure.

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