

U.S. NATIONAL ARCHIVES AND RECORDS ADMINISTRATION
Transcript of National Archives History Office Oral History Interview

Subject: Brenda Kepley

Interviewer: Stephanie Reynolds

January 25, 2024

[BEGIN RECORDING]

Stephanie Reynolds: Okay, I've got the recording started. I just want to thank you again for participating in this National Archives Oral History Project. We're documenting the history of the agency by preserving firsthand accounts. My name is Stephanie Reynolds, and I'm based out of our National Archives facility in Denver, Colorado. And I'm assisting the agency historian, Jessie Kratz, with these interviews. Today is Thursday, January 25th, 2024. And I'm speaking with Brenda Beasley Kepley. Okay, Brenda, just to get us started, could you tell me a little bit about your background and where you're from?

Brenda Kepley: Well, I'm from the Boston area. I grew up in Arlington, Massachusetts and hadn't really ventured too far afield until I moved down to Washington. I graduated from Regis College, which is a small, all-girls Catholic college just outside of Boston. I was a day-student, so I never lived away from home. It was a good education. It's still there. It's now co-ed, but I'm proud of them. I graduated in 1971.

I was a sociology/political science major. I tried student teaching. I didn't really know what I wanted to do. I didn't grow up wanting to be an archivist. I hardly knew what an archivist was. But anyway, by luck, I was literally knocking on doors looking for jobs. Arlington is very close to Trapelo Road in Waltham—so I went over there. I knew there was a federal facility over there. I believe there used to be a Corps of Engineers facility. I ended up going into the Records Center, which I really didn't know at the time. If you walk in the center door, you turn left and the reception window for the Records Center staff was there, and turn right, and the Kennedy Library Offices were there. And believe me, it was just a warehouse, as you know Records Centers are just warehouses. But I'm right-handed, so I turned right. I didn't know about the Library at the time.

But long story short, somebody came out and talked to me, and again, I was nervous as heck. And they said, "Well, if you go into Boston and take a typing exam, we'll see what we can do." They needed somebody to sit at that receptionist desk. And so I went in the next day or so. I went into the federal building in Boston, failed the typing test, and was devastated. [LAUGHS] I

had never taken a typing test in my life or a typing class. But the Library staff said, "Alright, don't worry. Just go take it again." And I just barely made 40 words a minute. That's 1971. I think, in order to get entry level anything in the federal government, you had to take a typing test. And, you know, things have changed. But anyway . . . I did, and I ended up being hired as a GS-3 Clerk-Typist at the Kennedy Library, which was just amazing. I mean, I grew up in Boston. John Kennedy was our Senator and Representative. I grew up the daughter of an FDR [Franklin D. Roosevelt] Democrat—and it's just the whole aura of that time. I know it's the same story . . . you know where you were when you heard the news that Kennedy was assassinated. I was sitting in a freshman high school class, and the nun came in and announced [Kennedy's assassination]. And we were all dismissed to go home. So walking in and being hired as a clerk-typist for what was the John F. Kennedy Library was amazing.

After the assassination, the Library staff had worked with the Kennedy Administration's records at the Archives building in DC. Immediately after President Kennedy was assassinated, Kennedy administration records were brought quickly to the National Archives Building on Pennsylvania Avenue. The staff that eventually moved to Waltham was working on the records until, I think, about 1969, when the records and the staff moved to the records center in Waltham. The permanent I. M. Pei-designed building for the Kennedy Library was not built until, I think, 1981. I mean, it was a long time. So I worked in the records center. I started as a clerk-typist, and I transcribed oral history interviews. I think I mentioned that to you. I had the earphones, reel-to-reel tape recordings, and a foot pedal! I guess things have changed!

This is where I met some of the first mentors that helped to shape my career. John Stewart was the Acting Director. John, Bill Moss, and Larry Hackman conducted most of the oral history interviews. Larry Hackman became the State Archivist of New York in Albany, and he came back to the Archives to be head of the NHPRC [National Historical Publications and Records Commission]. He ended up being Director of the Truman Library. Larry conducted many of the domestic policy interviews. Bill Moss, who was a historian, did most of the interviews regarding foreign policy. Megan Desnoyers, a superb archivist, was a wonderful mentor to me. They were all mentors. They really were. And I went from being a clerk-typist to a technician and working with Bill Moss and Megan on processing the President's Office Files and declassification of foreign policy records. And again, this is a young woman who grew up in that era. To think that I was working with the President's files and seeing his notes and doodles and signatures, it was just . . . ! But it was all luck. It was nothing I earned. It was just all luck, because I turned right. But, I still think that it was just remarkable and how fortunate I was.

I started at the Kennedy Library on November 22nd, 1971. November 22nd is the anniversary of the President's death. So that said something. And I walked in the door, literally, with the newly

appointed Director, appointed by the family, Dan Fenn, who was just another wonderful person. And I was just in awe of all of their knowledge and their professionalism and the—you know, I was 21. And I just never met people that smart or that articulate or that devoted. And they were professionals. Yeah, they had an admiration for the Kennedy administration, but they were professionals. They made hard choices about what needed to be done. And then after Robert Kennedy's assassination, there was more of a sense that they had to tell the story of that time. Roberta Greene also worked in DC doing a lot of the Robert Kennedy oral history interviews, and I worked with her just a little bit. She was another passionate person who happened to be friends with President Biden's first wife, Neilia. And so there was this connection of that time. And there was a real passion and a real commitment. I worked at the Library for about five years.

Dan Fenn's primary role was working with the family and the City of Cambridge and the City of Boston to get the new building built. Again, we were just in the warehouse. It wasn't glamorous. But his job was to get the building built.

Once presidential libraries are established and staffed, there is not much mobility or advancement. Although I loved the Library, and I'm a New Englander, I felt I needed to explore and grow. I've been in DC now for a long time. But New England and Boston are still my loves and to leave was very, very hard. Positions at the Library were already filled. There was no place to go; there was no place to grow. And the libraries, I think, are like that. They are set up. They're staffed. And people end up staying there, most of them—that's a generality. But anyway, there was no place for me to go [or for] other techs that were with me. It's a small unit, you know. So Bill Moss and Megan and Larry, they all kind of said, "Well, if you want to develop . . ." I mean, I was discovering this world of archives. At the same time, I didn't really have a sense of what they did. But, you know, the longer I was there, they were saying, "Well, if you really want to pursue this, then you really have to go to DC." And it was a hard decision to leave everything that I knew and loved, but I ended up applying. At that time, new hires, especially new hires in the Archivist series, came through the Office of Presidential Libraries, because with the end of each administration, there was a need to staff a new Presidential Library. And so they had the Archival Development Program, and they had the training program. So basically, I applied to the Office of Presidential Libraries into the Archival Training Program. And so I was eventually hired to go through that, and that's how I came down to DC.

Stephanie: Was that training program specific to the Presidential Libraries, or was it kind of generic?

Brenda: The end goal was that you were going to go to a Presidential Library. Many of the archivists who worked with the federal records in the National Archives Building came through the Presidential Libraries' training program. They were the Office that hosted the training program. I think, by the time I was going down there, you could go to the Nixon Library, or they also filtered into the National Archives staff in DC, which at that point, there was only one building. But it was mainly to staff the Presidential Libraries. They had the training program, and it was one or two years. And you went through rotations in various units of the Archives—out in the Records Center in Suitland. The rotations gave you a sense of the National Archives. And that's what, for me—I didn't have a sense of the National Archives. I knew about the Presidential Libraries, but I didn't have a sense of the National Archives or what it had. And that's when I started to see the different records and the different opportunities, I guess, or the different units, you know—motion pictures, still pictures, cartographic, old military, modern military, diplomatic records, all of that. So that's how I got into that training program, that I got to see really what the National Archives had beyond the Kennedy Library or the Presidential Libraries. It was much, much more than that. But Presidential Libraries were coordinating the training program then.

Stephanie: Did you have to apply for that or how did you get in?

Brenda: Yeah. It was a promotion. I was hired as a GS-3, but at that time, I got into the [Archives] Technician series at the Kennedy Library. That's when I was working on the processing and the national security files. But to get this transfer, again, my mentors at the library were saying you had to apply. It was a promotion to a GS-7, Archivist Trainee. But it was a different series at that point.

Stephanie: Going back to the JFK [John F. Kennedy] Library, when you were there—you started on November 22nd—were they having any sort of, like, a commemoration or anything at the library?

Brenda: No, it was [like] any other day. I mean, I'm sure the staff, whom I didn't know then and see, were probably talking about it back there, but way, way back in the stacks. But I wasn't part of that. It was just ironic, that's all, that I started on November 22nd. And I walked in. I was the lowest person there, GS-3, and I walked in with the new Director, who was jovial and happy and a wonderful man. He died a couple years ago at the age of 98 or 99. [CROSS-TALKING] He had been on the President's staff. You know, he wasn't in the news all the time, but he ended up being the Director and appointed by the family. The Library Directors, at least at that point, were usually recommended and appointed by the family, so he had a very close relationship with Jackie Kennedy. But he was also a professor at the Harvard Business School and did that all

the time that I was there. As I said, these were smart people! I had never I'm a working-class girl, you know. And I had never seen or been around . . .

I think that's what attracted me to this world is just the knowledge that a lot of these people had. And they didn't lord it over you or say how smart they were. They just were, because they were steeped in—the people doing the oral history—they were doing a lot of study. I mean, this is me. I don't know anything. But they were interviewing the highest level of staff in the Kennedy administration or in Bobby Kennedy's campaign. I mean, these were people that were in the news all the time. And so the interviewers had to know their stuff, and they did know this stuff. And, oddly enough, I have a copy of very lengthy—you know, a couple of inches thick—oral history interview of that first group of managers of the Kennedy Library, and they're talking about this very thing: what it was like to be in DC and be in the training program and, all of a sudden, something tragic happens, and they have to begin to make sense of what to do with all the records. And so there are interviews of Dan Fenn and John Stewart and Larry Hackman and Bill Moss and others who were working with Dan Reed, head of the Office of Presidential Libraries and . . . what it meant, what it was like to try to establish the Kennedy Library and respect the records and lives of two assassinated brothers, and what it must have been like when Robert Kennedy was killed on top of dealing with the first. But they have done an oral history for the Kennedy Library and for the National Archives, you know. But I have a copy of that, and it's quite long. So they talk about all of their work trying to establish the library and the rules and the, well, emotions of that. I was just a 21-year-old just walking in, and I didn't know anything about any of this.

Stephanie: But you were transcribing some of these interviews?

Brenda: I did. Yeah, yeah. With earphones, you know. They're taped. I don't know how you do it now, but we had reel-to-reel tape and a pedal on the floor that you had to stop, and I would type it. I remember Larry Hackman's handwriting was just awful, but I got to figure out how to read it. They had yellow legal-pad notes of their questions, and he would ask me before he went on the interview to type up his questions, because he just had them all scribbled and stuff. But, it was fun. The technology is very different now. It was reel-to-reel tape that I would stop and start when I couldn't understand the words. And I don't know what you do with "Ahs" and [LAUGHS] all of that, but it was very different technology.

Stephanie: Right, right. Yeah. Are there any interviews that really stick out in your mind?

Brenda: Oh, I don't remember that. With that level of interview, it's like you're in the room, you know. I was just an eavesdropper. [It was like] I was in the room with these guys who were

talking about the Cuban Missile Crisis or something. I mean, I think I was just . . . I don't know . . . sappy and in awe. I'm not a historian. But it was like you were in the room with that level.

And the other thing—and I don't know, I was asking my husband—I don't know when “oral history” started, but I think during this time, it was becoming a very normal part of academia. I mean, Don Ritchie, who was the Assistant Historian of the Senate, was very active in the Oral History Association. Bill Moss, who I worked with, was also very, very active in the Oral History Association. And they wrote manuals on how to do this. But I don't really know if the Oral History Association still exists. I think it's a valuable tool because it's very personal, you know, for historians. I have no illusion that anybody's going to look at this [LAUGHS], but for historians who are trying to get a sense of the time, I think it was then a very routine thing to do. And the hard thing was getting some of these people who were very, very busy and the egos are very high to sit down and talk. So the skill of the interviewer was probably, you know—you had to have the knowledge, too, but you had to be able to read the person and say, "Alright, this is maybe too much today" or something. And I'm sure many of them happened over several weeks. I mean, they had so many aspects of their interviews that they would have to talk about. I'm sure it didn't happen in one day, but . . . no, I don't remember any. [LAUGHS]

Stephanie: Okay. Did you ever get a chance to see or meet any of the Kennedy family members?

Brenda: No. Well, on the staff at the time—not the family—[was] Dave Powers, who was a good friend of the . . . I mean, from Charlestown. And he was, you know, a sidekick and told jokes. He was not a policy guy, but he was on the staff.

Stephanie: Okay.

Brenda: I went back for the dedication, when the building was finally dedicated, to be there and help with . . . I don't know . . . invitations or something. They let me go back. And the Kennedy family was there, so I was there at the dedication of the new building on Columbia Point in Boston Harbor. But no, I never really met them. But, I have to say I was a fan. So, that's alright. [LAUGHS]

Stephanie: Yeah, I could see being in awe when you walk in there and you're working on some of those papers and you're transcribing interviews and, you know . . . It's history at your fingertips.

Brenda: Yeah, because it was recent history. It wasn't 50 years later.

Stephanie: Right. Eight years.

Brenda: Even in 1971, it was very recent. And as I said, the Robert Kennedy assassination just added to what they had to handle. How do you handle, especially, the more personal records of assassinated men? You know, it was a trauma for that period of time in our history. But yeah, there is a little bit of . . . star . . . what is it? What is the word—you're caught up in the names and, you know, you're working with the President's records. I mean, how cool is that? I mean, yeah, and there was a lot of that going on with me. I know that I was just like . . . I couldn't believe it. It was all luck. It was not skill. It was luck. And as I said, the mentors that I had Mentors are so important and, later on in my career, I tried to be at least a little bit of a mentor to other people. But that was how I got into the National Archives. And that's pretty cool.
[LAUGHS]

Stephanie: Okay. Yes, I think so! Yeah. And so when you moved to the DC area, were you then working at AI? [CROSS-TALKING]

Brenda: Yeah, that was the only building. There was no AI. [LAUGHS] So there was Archives I. Well, it wasn't even called that. It was the National Archives Building. The Records Center in Suitland was there, but this was the National Archives Building. And again, it's just like, I must have been very stupid. I know I am, but here I was now in the National Archives Building

I got through the Archivist Training Program, where you did rotations. I don't know how they're training archivists now, but that model of doing rotations in different units of the building so you get a sense of different kinds of records and different functions and different tasks, reference versus processing versus conservation techniques or holdings maintenance—they didn't even call it holdings maintenance then—but that model, it moved out of the responsibility of the Office of Presidential Libraries into a more universal training program for archivists. I don't know how they do it now with new archivists, but I think it was so very valuable to learn. And it was also, alright, they're looking at you and you're looking at them and the different units and what you're like or are you're good at this or are you good at that, you know. I don't know how they do it now. But that model was very, very valuable and that was like a year or two of going through

The rotations were three or four months each. And so, you know, you got a sense of working in the different units, and you got to see the records. That's when I got to see the records that were in the real National Archives. That's when I got a sense of this is more than just the Presidential Libraries. It's way more. But, later on, I always said in my career that, "Yeah, I got to

work with the records of a President," and that was pretty cool. The records that I worked with later were not that. They were the bureaucratic, boring sometimes, records of federal agencies, and I always said some of them are deadly dull and just, "Why? Why? Why are we keeping this?" [LAUGHS] But others were just gems, but they don't have the President's signature on it. They had a soldier's signature on them, or a widow's, you know. But I mean, that's when I got the sense of the breadth of what federal records are. It's those rotations and then my work after that.

Stephanie: When you were done with that, did you have the choice to go where you wanted to go, or did they assign you to a place?

Brenda: I forget how. I don't know how it came about, but I ended—I think my first assignment was in what they used to call the Central Reference Division, which was, again, for me, I'm not a historian. I don't have, "My area is Civil War, military history or modern military." I'm not that. I was and always have been kind of a generalist. But the Central Reference Division, their job in the National Archives Building was you walk in the door as a researcher and I want to do research on genealogy or research State Department records. My job was to interview—it was a reference job—to interview them and try to say where in the building or where . . . do they need to go, and who do they need to talk to? So if they were doing diplomatic research or, what I figured out, they were going to need to look at State Department records. They needed to go to the Diplomatic Branch, and they needed to talk with . . . Ron Swarzak because he knows diplomatic records, and he'll be able to help them. And I would call. At that point, you would call ahead down to the Diplomatic Branch and say, "Alright, I'm sending somebody down." Or if they were doing Civil War military history, not genealogy, but military history, then they needed to go to the Old Military Branch. So, you know, it was a triage kind of role, but a reference role. And my office was right next to the National Archives Library, and I did a lot of running into the library and looking up things for people. And, if they didn't need to go to a branch, maybe some of the holdings of the Library would answer the question. So it was a reference triage role.

Stephanie: So you were talking with the researchers to find out what they were looking for, and then you knew where to send them.

Brenda: Well, I tried to know. I often had to call a branch and say, "Hey, somebody is here, and this is what they're looking for."

"Yeah. Send them down."

But again, I felt inadequate to be able to answer a lot of their questions, so they had to go—I didn't pull records. I mean, the people in the branches would say, "Alright, you need to look at this series or that series, and we'll pull it for you." You know, I wasn't doing that. But again, that was a great exposure to the breadth of what the holdings were.

Stephanie: Yeah.

Brenda: Again, I had good mentors. Al Blair was an African American, head of the Central Reference Division and dignified and smart. You walk into this place. You know nothing. And then you meet people that know what they're doing. And I just was always fortunate to know or to work under some of these people. And then Garry Ryan, who was the head of the Old Military [Branch]—that's what they used to call it, and I still call it Old Military, and that was records, I think, up to World War I—he was a crusty old guy, but [LAUGHS] he said, "Hey, do you want to come work in Old Military?" Again, I'm not a historian. I don't know about Civil War battles. But what you learn by that—and I did—I ended up going to that unit as a reference archivist. And there were people who, you know, they were coming in with specific questions. This is their research topic, and you had to try to help them. But again, I wasn't all by myself. There were actual Civil War historians on the staff that I could go to, and they would say, "Well, you need to . . ." And we had all-paper inventories with very brief series titles and stuff. And sometimes if you were answering letters, you had to go into the stacks and look it up yourself. And that's great training. You know where to look. And if you can't find it, then you go to Tim Nenner, who is still at Archives II, or Mike Musick, who is the Civil War Historian. Trevor Plante came much later, but he is a Civil War historian. Again, it's all great training, but I was in awe of these people who knew so much. I never knew a lot, but what you learn is how to find it, how to figure it out. That's what you learn. So I ended up in the Old Military. I forget how many years I was in each of these places.

Stephanie: When you were in the Central Research Room, was there anyone else doing the same thing as you, or was it just you?

Brenda: Ted Weir. There were two consultants—we were called consultants—under Al Blair and Bill Lynd, who was a character, and he would joke—he was an old guy, too—but he would joke with researchers coming in, and the jokes would go over their head, you know.

Stephanie: [LAUGHS]

Brenda: And Ted and I would be listening, "Oh my God." And some of the things he said, he'd be called up today as very inappropriate. But anyway. [LAUGHS] But he's deceased. Al Blair is

deceased. Ted Weir. Tim Mulligan, his specialty was World War II records. That was also his first assignment after coming through the training program. So yeah, there were others, because sometimes it got busy and you needed more than one person to field these questions. So it was a good assignment, but it wasn't working with the records. It was more like a reference librarian almost, or you know, you got to steer people in the right direction. So . . .

Stephanie: Right. Okay. Do you remember any policies there that, you know, just how things have changed in the reference room from then until more modern times? Were researchers coming in with all of their bags with them? Did they have to go through . . . [CROSS-TALKING].

Brenda: Oh, there was none of that. No, none of that. I mean, there were no lockers or anything like that. Again, I don't know the dates of this, but there were a couple of incidents of theft. And I don't remember the name. That is a good question, but I don't remember the name. But it is well-known. This researcher came in—dignified, dapper dresser, working on Civil War stuff. I know I talked with him. I know the people in the Old Military talked with him, brought out records. Come to find out, he stole quite a few things. And you feel like—I mean, archivists are nice people. Archivists want to help. Archivists want to be . . . not be part of your story, but listen to your story and help you, you know? But somebody like this guy—Trevor would know the name of this. I don't know if he was with us then.

But this guy stole. He had his coat, put the coat over the back of the chair and, all of a sudden—and again, I don't know the dates of this and it wasn't the only one. But you feel taken. You feel used. And I think Mike Musick, who was the Civil War expert who lives in Harpers Ferry, which is a Civil War town—I don't know how it came about, but other historians began to see images of documents that they knew were from the National Archives, and they started notifying people at the Archives that these things were missing. And then, of course, there was a whole search for reference slips that showed the series and boxes that this guy asked for. The reference slip, you fill it out [that] it's going to so and so and this series and these boxes. And so there was all this searching of what he went through and what could be missing. And anyway, he ended up going to jail, and some of the records were retrieved. I don't know if they all were. But he wasn't the only one. I remember I talked with him. "Sure! We're happy to help" and blah, blah, blah. I think after some of these incidents—and, I think, come to find out [that] he had also been up at the Library of Congress and [did the] same thing. Some of those security measures began [at that time]. Over time, there were a lot more that went in [to effect]. And now it's a clean research room. There are lockers. And we'll give you the paper. The guards inspect as you leave. It's a lot stricter. But when I was [there], that wasn't—because archivists are trusting, you know?

Stephanie: Right.

Brenda: Anyway . . .

Stephanie: Well, I'm sure because of some of those instances back then is why we have all the policies today about [CROSS-TALKING].

Brenda: Yeah, I mean, there were other instances. There's a video of Trevor talking about one of them on the Archives webpage. It just kills you, you know? You just feel so mad [LAUGHS]. But now there's a—you know, Mitch Yockelson and others in All, they go out and investigate. Mitch goes to Civil War shows, and he'll look for things. "This doesn't look right. Where did this . . ." He's kind of checking things out. But there are other serious, serious instances of theft.

Stephanie: Okay. When you were at the Old Military Branch—that's what you were calling it—so how did that relate to the Military Personnel Records Center in St. Louis?

Brenda: Well, I mean, the Personnel Records Center . . . it's that. It's personnel records, the old military or modern military—they used to call it. It's not called that anymore. They are the operational records of the army during the Civil War. They're the regimental records. They're the correspondence. They're the pension files of Civil War soldiers and service records of Civil War soldiers, you know. I shouldn't say that. I mean, the National Personnel Records Center in St. Louis is World War I and later personnel records.

Stephanie: Okay.

Brenda: In the National Archives Building was everything up to World War I, so from the Revolutionary War up to World War I. The bulk of it was the Civil War service records—the military service files—and then, subsequently, the Civil War pension files. Just a statistic: there are three million—I believe I'm right—pension files in the National Archives Building. Three million starting from the Revolutionary War! It's amazing [LAUGHS], you know! So again, just stupid me, . . . that's when I say, "Alright, you went from the records of a President to the records of a soldier or his widow, and heard their stories."

And so the Archives is not just about famous people. Mostly, it's not about famous people. It's about everyday people. And whether you're talking about immigration records or Indian Affairs records or, you know, Japanese internment records, it's not about the Presidents. In fact, very little of it is about the President. Mostly, it is about other people and agency policies and things like that. So I came to really feel grateful that I got to see that difference. So . . .

Stephanie: Yeah. When that branch, the Old Military Branch, reorganized, what kind of changes happened? It became the Military Service Branch, I think, is what you said?

Brenda: Well, Military Service Branch . . . yeah. I mean, again, my chronology—there's always reorganizations. And the military service and pension files and Census records, that's, I mean, a big part. Genealogy is a big part of the records or the work of the National Archives. And genealogists were a huge client, so to speak. And so, at that point, all of the Census records and everything were on microfilm. Very few of the paper/textual records from that time, other than Revolutionary War records, were on microfilm. So people had to come in and ask for the original Civil War soldier's file or a pension file. And we would help them figure out if there was one and all that. So yeah, there was a Military Service Branch, and I was assigned to that.

Two more mentors: Gerry Phillips and Maida Loescher—again, I just felt privileged to—they were good people, smart, good archivists, you know, just professional as all get out. But it was to help improve the Military Service Branch. It's huge, like I said, three million pension files, and they had to be taken care of physically. At that point, I think I probably transitioned more to handling the physical aspects of the records, less so on the reference. But, yeah. That was the Military Service Branch.

Stephanie: Yeah. I wondered if that changed your responsibilities when the reorganization took place. So it sounds like you were working more with the actual records instead of doing reference.

Brenda: Right, right. Right, right. Well, I was working with the records in Old Military, but that was a reference job. But, as I think of it now, in the Military Service Branch, I ended up doing a lot more physical work on the records, taking care of them physically, because there was a whole other staff, mostly technicians—again, you know, the technicians, they don't get the credit they deserve. But, I mean, they were the ones who were doing the reference mostly. I remember this was sometime in the 80s. The Archives was still under the ddIGSA, General Services Administration. And GSA said you could apply to get a desk computer. Wow!

Stephanie: [LAUGHS]

Brenda: [LAUGH] This was old typewriters, paper correspondence, everything. And so Maida and I—and there is an interview with Maida. I didn't see one of Gerry. She should be included. Maida and I wrote up a proposal to get one of these newfangled computers with a desktop dot

matrix printer. And we got it. [LAUGHS] I forget what we did with it. We probably made box lists or something like that. But, you know, that's . . . I'm just showing my age.

Stephanie: Very cool.

Brenda: That's the Archives. The Archives, you know, [had] old wooden desks that were there from the 30s, and manual typewriters that were there from the 30s, dial telephones—not even push-button telephones. I mean, it became a joke, but that's what we had. So, it was funny.

Stephanie: Technology has changed. [LAUGHS]

Brenda: [LAUGHS] Yep. Yep. From, you know, oral histories with earphones and reel-to-reel-tapes to dot matrix printers, and now, look at you! [LAUGHS] So . . .

Stephanie: Did you notice any differences, in your particular job, when the agency went from being under GSA to becoming independent in 1985?

Brenda: I think so. Again, I was kind of down low, you know. But I remember the battles that the Organization of American Historians (OAH)—I mean, they were the lobbying groups—to get . . . when Nixon resigned, that whole Watergate thing. . . . Again, the Archives gets involved in everything, and you see it now with what's happening. And the whole Watergate thing was going on. You think it has nothing to do with the Archives. But, when Nixon was forced to resign, there was a threat. And historians can say it much more articulately than I can, but there was a real threat—the records were going to go to California—that records were going to be destroyed when they got there because of legal issues. And these are Presidential records. Before then, Presidential files were not considered federal records. A President could do what he wanted. The records didn't automatically come to the National Archives. Before that point, Kennedy records, Johnson records, Roosevelt records, they were all donated to the National Archives. Roosevelt started it, and it was just customary. But it wasn't law.

Stephanie: Okay.

Brenda: And so the records, we assumed they were going to go to, what is it, San Clemente or wherever Nixon was living. But there was a real threat he was going to take all the records, he and his staff, to there, and what would happen to them? The Archives had no claim on them. The government had no claim on them. Others can tell a better story, more accurately, but this is my impression. But it was close that those records were not going to—something would happen to them. So Congress stepped in and said, "No, those records are going into the custody

of the National Archives until further things can be worked out." And it was after that that the Presidential Records Act that now governs Presidential records—it was in the 70s after the Nixon-Watergate scandal—established the fact that records of the Office of the President and his staff are public records. They belong to the federal government. They belong to the American people. And then there's the division between Presidential files, personal files, and campaign files. There is a distinction, and the staff at the White House is supposed to follow that. But that wasn't a given during Watergate. So I remember all of that. That was [when the National Archives was] part of the GSA, because the head of the GSA, I believe, was a Nixon appointee. And, you know, there was a real threat to the records. So yeah, but that's a whole other story [and] probably a lot of articles [have been] written on that. But that's why the Trump thing . . . who knows how the records got down there out of the custody of the . . . Lord only knows. But they don't belong to him, much less classified records. Sorry. I'm showing my bias. But it wasn't a given for the Nixon time. So that was the difference with GSA. The Archives now is independent, and we know when a record or records should be coming to us. So, I mean, that's how precarious it was.

Stephanie: Yeah. We don't think about that today so much. I mean, you know, obviously with Trump and classified records and that sort of thing . . .

Brenda: Yeah, yeah. I always say that for a lot of things there's a reason that rules and regulations [are in place], or there's a reason that laws are passed. And that was the reason that the Presidential Records Act was passed. So I'm probably telling you all these stories out . . . [LAUGHS]. Who knows. But that's a true one. I mean, there were articles about that and how close they came. But that was a big battle then for independence, and I believe that came in 1975 or something like that.

Stephanie: Okay. That's a really interesting viewpoint. I've asked that question before, and I've never gotten that story, so that's really interesting.

Brenda: Yeah. But, again, I'm just saying that people [should] want to research that. I mean, I'm just telling my memories, my version. But I think, basically, it's true.

Stephanie: So when Archives II was built in College Park, Maryland, did you move over to that building or did you stay at what then became Archives I?

Brenda: Well, that's another huge story. This was, you know, Gerry Phillips and Maida Loescher and Michael Kurtz. Michael Kurtz, unfortunately, passed away a year or so ago. And Adrienne Thomas, who also passed away a couple of years ago, was in administration. She was a Deputy

Archivist. The Archives never had space. It still doesn't have space. Regions don't have space. There was lobbying to get money to build another building. They got money. The plan was that they were going to build, and they were looking for a site. Everybody wanted the site to be—there was an old dilapidated building across the street from Pennsylvania Avenue where we said, "Yeah, we can build a tunnel under Pennsylvania Avenue for a new building right across the street." Well, that didn't happen because more powerful people—that was a prime site for development and now it's where the Navy Memorial is. I don't know if you've been downtown, but that's where they wanted the new building to be, and we could just go across the street. But no. So there was a long search for a site, and that's when it ended up in College Park. And Steny Hoyer, who's the Representative from that district, was instrumental in getting that. It's near the University of Maryland.

So that was all playing out. And people who worked with the records, Michael Kurtz and others, said, "Alright, we've got to start working on how we're going to do this." And so he set up the Records Relocation Branch, and five years before the actual move, he appointed Gerry Phillips to head that and Maida Loescher to head it. The complexity of that move was unbelievable. So I was assigned to that unit with other people: Suzanne Harris; Jane Fitzgerald; Bob Matchette, who passed away just a couple of months ago. I mean, again, you get to admire just . . . yeah, we all have quirks. We all drive each other crazy. I'm exaggerating. We had a lot of laughs too. The people that worked on that project did tremendous work, and we got it done. It was moving the records from the National Archives Building that had been there since 1935, and also bringing records from the Washington National Records Center in Suitland that were archival records. They weren't temporary. They were archival records. And they shouldn't have been in the Suitland [facility] for so long, but there was no other room. They were always wanting to build a new records center out there, and they haven't been able to yet. But records had to come from Suitland either to downtown or to College Park. So the logistics of it was unbelievable.

Plus, my job, us archivists, was to go into the stacks and figure out what the heck was there. You can't move anything unless you have a sense of what's there. And you know, we were all, "Okay, military records are on eight "W" and on the west side of the building. And civil records are on the east side of the building, and we know basically what's there." But once you say I have to move them, you have to have lists. And you have to be able to move them. If they're not in a box that's halfway decent, you have to rebox. The conservation staff gave guidelines. But one of their hard-fast rules was that the "volumes," many of which date from the 19th century, had to be either in a box or shrink-wrapped. And everyone would say, "[BREATHES IN SHARPLY] you've got to shrink-wrap all this stuff. That's not good." Well, there's no way they could have Shrink-wrapping allowed the volumes to go back on the shelf. If you box

everything, it expands. Anyway, we had to have lists. We had to have labels. We had to have boxes; we had to have different sized boxes. But most of all, we had to know what we were moving. And some of it, we were describing it for the first time and giving it a name, you know. And it wasn't processing to the sense that we were refolding, although we did a lot of refolding inside the box or folding for the first time, but it was to get a minimum amount, a basic level of information to describe what was moving, how many boxes, number the boxes, and all that, and make sure that it was safe to move. And that's what we did. And it was dirty work. It was hard work, but it was very rewarding, too. And, sure, we complained. We always complained, the group of us.

We had a good group, very good. And we had an army of students. We were able to hire students on temporary appointments. They were great summer jobs for kids . . . [or] Christmas break jobs for students to come in. We sent them up to the stacks to write a folder title list of what's in this box and then come down and type it, or do a box list of these boxes, and then come down and print out box labels. All shrink-wrapped volumes had to be—we couldn't put a label on the volume on the outside, but we had to put tabs inside saying what it was. And it was unbelievably complicated, tedious, and hands-on. Gerry and Maida, along with Bob Matchette, Mike Pilgrim, and Henry Mayer in Suitland, were figuring out the logistics and keeping everything on schedule. They were a wonderful group of people.

And then the first day of the move came. John Carlin was Archivist then. Big trucks backed in. Oh, everything had to be sequenced—and this was Bob Matchette that sequenced what was going to move first and where in All it was going to go, what stacks. Mike Pilgrim, he worked closely with Bob Matchette on just the logistics of it. We were just following, "Okay, this is going to move." But it was unbelievable. But we got a lot of work done.

We did a lot of good work for the records. It wasn't just moving them. We figured out what some of them were, and that wasn't easy. We were going from nothing. You know nothing about this stuff. And you're trying to do a lot of administrative history. What is this stuff? It was very rewarding. It started like five years before the move, [before] the first truck was going to come. And so we felt good about it. But it wasn't the kind of processing that I think all of us knew we should be doing. We should be really fixing this stuff up really well and refolding it all and all this. It wasn't that, but it was pretty darn good, I would say. I mean, and maybe those who are working with those boxed records now say, "What is this?" But it was a whole lot more than a lot of those records had [had]. And I remember even with stuff that wasn't moving, we went into the stacks and continued that. "Alright, we've got to do a whole lot of reboxing," and at that point, the conservation people had a box machine, and they were able to develop custom-sized boxes for volumes. And that was terrific.

But again, once you start doing that—there's thousands of volumes in Archives I—a box doesn't go back on the shelf. It expands, and so you need more space. And so we thought, "Oh good. We're going to be able to really expand some of these records. That's not going to be a problem, because there's going to be more space in AI." Well, then they decided to renovate Archives I. So the stacks that were now empty after the move were going to disappear, because the renovation took away, I think, in some areas, the first three levels of the building. So those stacks disappeared. And so we didn't have the space to expand that we thought we would. So we had to do a lot of this moving within the building after we thought we were done with moving, but we weren't. But anyway, you look back on a career and you say, "Well, there's reasons things happen." I mean, there were good reasons the building needed to be renovated. They did a lot of good work on the renovation, but they took away the first three levels, underground levels mostly, of stacks.

Stephanie: Okay.

Brenda: That's a huge loss of space.

Stephanie: That's a lot. Right.

Brenda: And I don't know if you've been to the building, but that's where the theater is now So the renovation happened after that.

Stephanie: Wow.

Brenda: But it was good. And just a brief aside—I think it probably was before records relocation—I was assigned to work on the updates to the *National Archives Guide*, and Sharon Thibodeau was head of that. You know, archivist extraordinaire. She lives in Colorado. And I don't know if there's an oral history of her, but there should be, because she was a director of different divisions. And Bob Matchette, again, who worked on the logistics, had that kind of mind. But he did administrative history, which people forget. It's kind of a boring thing, but it's so necessary for archivists. You got to know when this agency was established or this office within the agency [was established] or when it was transferred to another agency, you know. He did it all. I mean, we all did, but he was just so good at it. These people were just doing their job.

Stephanie: At what point were you digitizing records? This was after the move or . . . ?

Brenda: Yeah, after the move.

Stephanie: Right. Okay.

Brenda: You know, after all that, . . . my son was very ill, and so I had to take a couple leaves of absence. So I came back. Again, other reorganizations [took place], and I applied to—I forget what the position was—but it was basically a supervisor. I had not been a supervisor. I'm not naturally inclined to be a supervisor, but I did just because you had that sense, and I talked with other colleagues there. "Well, if not you, then who? If not me, then who?" You know, like that kind of thing. But then my son had childhood cancer, you know—lymphoma when he was 4 and leukemia when he was 13. So I had to take a long leave of absence. And then I came back part-time for a while, because he was still in treatment. But anyway, I came back, and that's when I became a supervisor. And then it was with the same kind of records: the old military, the pension files, the military service records, and all that. And it was in the newly renovated building.

So they were giving us new space, new desks. Adrienne Thomas was instrumental in the renovation, and she got—well there was money for new [items]. They got rid of all the old desks and all the old telephones and all the old furniture. And by then, the computers were part of our daily work. And digitization—I had always worked on different microfilm projects, which was the mode of distribution of records forever, from the 50s, you know. And I was part of some of those projects. The Archives was developing a very active volunteer program. One of the big series that we worked on with volunteers was the Freedmen's Bureau Records, Record Group 105, and those were a vital interest to African American history, Reconstruction history, all that. And they're arranged by state. And it was a military function, the Freedmen's Bureau. So, we had a whole process over several years to get all of those records on film, each southern state. Cindi Fox was my supervisor at the time.

Stephanie: Okay.

Brenda: And so there were volunteers who worked on those doing that hands-on flattening. You know, you can't microfilm anything without it being [flat]—this is all tri-folded stuff. So flattening anything that needed repair had to go to the conservation lab. Again, it's logistics. It was a very proud moment when we got all of The Freedmen Bureau's records on film. It took several years, but it's a huge collection but small in terms of the holdings of the National Archives. But it's a huge collection, and it's all hands-on. You learn very fast that archival work is hands-on. That's why working from home, it wasn't so much an option then. You have to be with the records. So anyway, that was microfilm. But after that, digitization started to come

into being. Many of the microfilm publications that had been completed since the 1950s were converted to digital publications. We also had some partners from Ancestry.com who wanted—Ancestry wants a lot of things microfilmed, digitized. When each of the Census years is released, they buy up the rolls. I mean, this is how they do it. I mean, the Archives makes duplicate copies of all the Census rolls on Day One of the Census release, Ancestry has all of those rolls, and they have their volunteers indexing all the names on the Census rolls. Quite amazing.

They wanted to get into a lot of the other holdings of the National Archives, mainly pension files, and that's when the pension files became. . . . Like I said, there's 3 million pension files. They're never all going to be done, you know? But Jackie Bedell, who is still working there, is passionate about access, about digitization, about care of the records. So she ended up leading the hands-on work and working with the volunteers on how to flatten records and all that kind of stuff. They all had to be trained by the conservation staff. And we also started a project on some of the land records—which are very valuable for the Bureau of Land Management—homestead applications, and things like that. But it's slow. There's never enough staff to do it. There's never enough space. Once those records are flattened, they're not going to go back into the same space that they came from. They're just not. So that is a constant. . . . It's a nice idea, but there's all these other factors that go on—space being a huge, huge part of it.

You know, the microfilm lab is now no longer; it's a digitization lab. I've not seen it, but there's a digitization lab now at Archives II, where all the microfilm equipment [had been]. . . . After Archives II was built, there was no microfilm equipment in Archives I, and there's not enough space to build a dedicated space for digital equipment, meaning the big flat cameras and stuff like that. But there is a small operation at Archives I. There's, I believe, a bigger one now at Archives II. It's digitization, but that requires all the same care and prep and conservation work as microfilm prep. You know you can't handle some of these records. There's very few series in Archives I—maybe there's some at Archives II—that can go through a high-speed scanner So, I was part of the beginning of tha. But I think a lot more has happened now and part of that is, again, the Archival Research Catalog. Descriptions or information or box lists or whatever are developed in the process that hopefully can somehow be entered into the Archival Research Catalog, which is another way we use students a lot, to go out and make a box list for the Archival Research Catalog.

Stephanie: Okay. So people can know that it exists and can . . .

Brenda: Yeah. Yeah. Right.

Stephanie: . . . be able to access.

Brenda: But it's just a drop in the bucket. Even though so much has been done, there's so much more to do.

Stephanie: Right. There's so many records out there, and they keep coming. So [CROSS-TALKING].

Brenda: Yeah. So, I think, in my career, I was always more [in] processing and with the records. I mean, I did some reference, but I liked the hands-on kind of thing, working with the records. Not that it was all, you know, we all had our moments. "Oh my God. I wish I was done with this" or, "This is boring stuff." But, on the whole, we have a respect for what the records are, and you just do it and you make them better. That's what you try to do. It was always frustrating. You go into the stacks and you see so much more that needs to be helped, and you're not going to get to it, you know? You're never going to get it.

Stephanie: Yeah. I mean, just not enough staff, not enough time.

Brenda: No. Not enough space.

Stephanie: Yeah. We do the best that we can.

Brenda, do you have just a few more minutes? I think we're just a little bit over our time that I scheduled.

Brenda: Yeah.

Stephanie: I just didn't know if you still had a little bit of time.

Brenda: Yeah, yeah. I'm fine.

Stephanie: Okay. Just wanted to make sure.

Brenda: Sure, if I can ever stop coughing.

Stephanie: I'm glad you've got some water there. . . . I know that you also were an instructor for a while with the Modern Archives Institute?

Brenda: Institute. Yeah.

Stephanie: I wonder if you could talk about that a little bit, what that was and how you got to be the instructor for that.

Brenda: [COUGHES]

Stephanie: Just take your time.

Brenda: Well, when I was coming up or through most of my career, where did you go to train to be an archivist? There weren't any training programs. The National Archives recruited mostly people with history degrees.

Stephanie: Okay.

Brenda: If you were hired into the Archivist series from outside, not the way I came up—I came up from a Clerk-Typist, you know—but if there was an opening, the qualifications that you had [to have was] probably a graduate degree in history, not an undergraduate. That's why all these people were so smart. But so they were trained as historians, a lot of them. I don't know the percentage who had doctorates. They were historians. And I know there is a debate probably whether that's—you need to know history to work on some of these records. Anyway, where do you learn the practice of archiving? There were no training programs. Archivists in state archives, or little historical societies or foundations, don't have training programs. I mean, they're just small one- or two-person shops, most of them. The Society of American Archivists [SAA], I don't know when it was established or whatever, but you went to programs for the SAA to hear about issues and archives and donor relations and all of that. That's where you went. I don't know when it started, but it was going on for a long time before I ever got up.

The Archives established the Modern Archives Institute, and it was a two-week training program for outside people—not for in-house staff, but for people from all over the country who came to get to the "Mecca," I guess. I mean, the National Archives is a big institution. The Institute was co-sponsored by the Library of Congress. But [the Institute] was always held in the National Archives Building. It changed over time. There might have been a lecture or two by somebody from the Library of Congress, but most of it was done by Archives staff. And they brought in different people, different lecturers, . . . and they paid for David Gracy from the University of Texas, and he would come, and he was big in the SAA. He was great at telling stories. Anyway It was a two-week training program, an introduction to archives—not the National Archives, but an introduction to the archival profession, how archives got established,

and best practices. The lectures covered the practical aspects of processing, description, figuring out what something was, coming up with series titles, what a good series title should include—not wordy, but descriptive—have good dates, and linear measurements, just the basics . . .

Stephanie: Right. [CROSS-TALKING]

Brenda: . . . you know, and then come up with a series description. Specialists from various units would come to discuss different formats, such as archivists from the Still Pictures Branch [who would discuss]: How do you deal with photographic records? How do you deal with motion pictures? How do you deal with cartographic records, electronic records? Then how do you do reference? Things like that. So it was over two weeks, eight hours a day. These people came, and they paid their own way. There was a fee for it, but it was really—if you've ever tried to go to training programs outside, they're very expensive. This was not; the fees were very reasonable.

But anyway, one of the lecturers, Director Maygene Daniels—[the Institute] was in different offices in the building, the offices of education—worked for the National Archives, but then she became the archivist for the National Gallery of Art across the street. Anyway, my friend from the Kennedy Library, Megan Desnoyers, was one of the lecturers, and she would come down and stay with me. She was the epitome of a very good archivist: detailed, smart. She worked a lot with Jackie Kennedy's files and others. The Kennedy Library has the Ernest Hemingway papers, because of Jackie Kennedy and her relationship with Mary Hemingway. So, Megan processed those. I mean, just a superb archivist. But she would come down and do the arrangement and description lecture—and that was two days because that's the core of—I hope I'm not offending other people—arrangement and description of papers is kind of the basics. And so that's two days. And then the lecturer would pull series from the National Archives' holdings for them to work with real records and real record series and would bring in old stuff and new stuff. The workshop was to look through these records and describe them, and we'd have to rebox or hide the labels for everything, and figure out what they were without any background, you know? It was because of Megan's involvement that I ended up [teaching], when she decided she was not going to do it anymore. I worked with her a couple of times, and then I ended up taking over that arrangement and description [lecture]. [CROSS-TALKING]

Stephanie: I was going to say it sounds like a very good, beneficial program.

Brenda: It was.

Stephanie: I'm wondering why they stopped it.

Brenda: Mary Rephlo became the Director of [the Institute] for several years. She's retired, but she had various jobs in the building. One of them was the Director of the Modern Archives Institute. She was also involved in doing some work with Ancestry and digitization at a policy level. She was the Director of the Institute and, about the time I left—Mary and I retired about the same time—they just stopped it, and we felt bad because there was nothing else like it, and it provided a great service to the wider archival community. Now the hiring comes from university library programs. And, you know, that's fine. That's fine. But there aren't archival training programs. The clientele were all great. You know, people came from all over, sometimes from different countries, to the Institute. Many attendees were from religious organizations, nuns or clergy who were given the responsibility of caring for their order's records. What should we do with them? They were not going to go to library school to be trained. We also had people attending from corporate archives, historical societies, non-profit groups, all different kinds of places that have records and archives. I don't know where they go for training or guidance now. I mean, I really don't. And it was a shame. It stopped about the time that Mary and I retired. But the powers that be, I think they just didn't want to deal with it anymore. But other than our time, it didn't cost the Archives all that much, I don't think. That's my personal opinion, and I think it's a shame. I think it was a great way for the Archives to give back to the broader archival community. We don't stand alone, even though we're a big institution. We're archivists, and we try to help each other.

Besides Megan, Pat Osborne, and Don McIlwain, who were at All, helped me and But there were other lecturers we could get, all from the Archives staff. One of the things you learn is, especially in a setting like that—the Institute—is that people like talking about what they do. . . . It brought me out of my desk job for a couple of days when I was talking about all this stuff. And I'm not a great lecturer. I didn't always get the best reviews, but I kind of knew what I was doing. But other people, they just love talking about, "Well, I work in Still Pictures. And this is how we deal with different issues." I mean, they like talking about what they do. And so, I think it's a loss for the Archives. I don't know if there are similar programs, but I don't know what they're doing now. I don't think they're doing anything anywhere close to that. But it went on for probably 40 years. And then it just stopped.

Stephanie: Oh my gosh.

Brenda: You know?

Stephanie: I didn't realize it went on that long. Okay.

Brenda: Well, you'd have to find out. But it went on for a long time, and it's a shame, I think. And people look to the Archives. It was held twice a year, and there was usually a waiting list. People would inquire when the next Institute was scheduled: "When will you accept applications?" And there were only—I don't know how many—probably 20 slots, 25 at the most, you know. So . . .

Stephanie: Okay. Small class. Yeah.

Brenda: Well, I mean it's all about room and Anyway, I think it's a shame. Again, I don't think of myself as a teacher. I'm not. And I don't think I was the best. I could have done better. But it was always nice. [Some of the topics were:] How do you move records? And some of them were faced with that problem of having to move records out of where they were to another place and, you know, you could give them pointers. You could give them names of, "You might want to talk with so and so" and all that. Where do you get supplies? What are access issues? [CROSS-TALKING] So I don't know what the profession is doing now. I think the SAA still exists.

Stephanie: Hmm. Yeah.

Brenda: I think the Oral History Association still exists, but I'm not sure. It's still all valid. It's still all valuable. Yeah.

Stephanie: Right. Right. Yeah.

Brenda: And I was just part of this. I wasn't running any of these, all my positions. I'm just a worker, you know. I wasn't responsible for a lot of the planning or anything. I just did the work. But it ended up being pretty rewarding. And I always, when I retired or [was] in the Institute, I've always said I felt very privileged to have had the experiences that I had with all the complaints, with all the "Huh," with all the drudgery of some of it. But on the whole, I was very lucky.

Stephanie: So when did you retire?

Brenda: Oh dear. [LAUGHS] Time goes. I think it was like 2014, 2015.

Stephanie: Okay.

Brenda: Forty-two years in the National Archives. So, you know.

Stephanie: Wow!

Brenda: Time flies. From 1971 . . . I think it was . . . and I'm like, "Oh, it was only about six years ago." No, I think it's been longer than that!!

Stephanie: [LAUGHS]

Brenda: I was 65, and I'm about to turn 75 so . . .

Stephanie: Oh my gosh! I would never have guessed. Wow.

Brenda: Forty-two years. And that's why your generation or my son's generation, they don't . . .

"You stayed in one place the whole time? That sounds awful."

Stephanie: A lot of them do. Yeah.

Brenda: But, you know, starting out, you don't know. I worked for the same agency, but I think I had a lot of different experiences.

Stephanie: Yes.

Brenda: And I met my husband there. So that's why I'm still in DC, and I'm not back up in Boston.

Stephanie: Okay. Mhm.

Brenda: But anyway . . .

Stephanie: Did they throw you a party or anything when you left? Did they do anything?

Brenda: I didn't want to do anything. Not [CROSS-TALKING]. And I felt like it was time. David had already retired. And I felt like I was turning into somebody I didn't want to be. You know, I was starting to sound like one of these old people that just, you know, "Well, years ago we did it this way or that way or . . ." I think that I didn't want to become somebody like that. And

there's always battles. There's always, "We gotta move this. We're going to regionalize this, so we're going to do this, that and the other thing." And "Why? Why do you have to do that? Don't you know how valuable these things are?" You know, I was starting to become that, and I didn't want to. But with close staff, we just went—I didn't want a big party. I'm not a public person, you know?

Stephanie: Okay. I hear that a lot, just wanting to kind of go out quietly.

Brenda: The archival profession is populated by a bunch of introverts, you know, and I know I'm one. I didn't want a big party, so just a group of us went—the Archives Building is situated in downtown DC on Pennsylvania Avenue, and the public entrance is on Constitution Avenue. On the other side of that is the Sculpture Garden or the National Gallery of Art. And they have a nice pavilion, and we just went out there and had—it was just a May day, and it was just beautiful. That's all I wanted. I didn't want a big public thing. So yeah, it was hard. It was sad. But, it happens to all of us. [LAUGHS]

Stephanie: Right. Right. What do you think is your proudest accomplishment from your time at the Archives?

Brenda: I'm not really sure. I think it was my relationships with the staff. When I was a supervisor—and I retired as a supervisor—that was a hard role. It's hard to be tough. I didn't want to be tough. I'd like to think the people liked me as a supervisor, as a person. I'd like to think—and I think I was—that I was somewhat of a mentor to some people, you know. You pass it forward. And I tried to be that. It didn't always work, but I think I tried to be that. You know, as you age, you get older, and you're the one that's been there. You're the one with the memory. And these young people like you just come up and, What do they want to do? They're having a hard time. They want to move to this branch, or they're not getting promoted. That was the hardest thing. As a supervisor, especially mid-level, but a supervisor in general, you have no power, even though that was the hardest thing. There were techs that should have been made specialists or promoted, or there were specialists that should have been promoted. "Why can't you do that?" It happens to every supervisor there that writes these letters recommending so and so for a promotion or this, and you have no power. You know, that was very, very hard and very hard to explain. "I'm doing my best. I can't . . ." Especially with the technicians, some of them, they carry you. Not everybody. Not everybody is a good archivist. Not everybody is a good tech. But I'd like to think that I tried to help people in their work or in their careers.

Stephanie: Mhm.

Brenda: Anyway, I'd like to think that.

Stephanie: Yeah.

Brenda: Whether I did [the] work—I'm sure I have these, especially in Records Relocation—we had to put the sticky labels on notes and boxes or something and, you know, like a temporary series. I'm sure [the staff are] going in, and they're finding all of this stuff from Brenda about, "You know, who is this person?" like we've all done. We've all found notes from previous generations of archivists. And there's nobody that knows me now, except Trevor. [LAUGHS] There's some people at AI that know me, but it's your generation now so

Stephanie: [LAUGHS]

Brenda: There are good foundations there, but you know with what the Archives is dealing with now, with electronic records and everything else, I couldn't have worked in that. I couldn't work in electronic records. I liked the paper. I was fortunate, you know. So

Stephanie: Yeah. Is there anything else that you would like to bring up about your time at the Archives that I haven't already asked about?

Brenda: Well . . . I think the techs should be part of the Oral History Program. Again, I'm a novice, and I think I've always felt uncomfortable being somebody that's more privileged than others in life or, certainly, at work. When I came down into the Archival Training Program, techs had been there for 20, 30 years or, you know, and they were doing the work. I remember one—this was early on—going to a tech and [saying], "Well, where are these records?" And she flatly said, "You're the archivist. You figure it out." That was just, you know, it's the hierarchy. It's the culture of the Archives.

Then, and I think now, a lot of the techs, at least in DC, had only high school educations. They're not advancing. This is a job. They're supporting families. They're not going to get any higher than a GS-5 or GS-6 in DC, which is expensive. And I always felt a little bit uncomfortable with giving orders, you know. I did, and we worked together, and developed a relationship. And I think I had a good relationship with a lot of the techs. Some of them became experts in the records that they were serving. And I know others worked mightily to get—not everyone deserves this, but, you know—specialist positions.

It's hard, and I think it's unfair. I know darn well that there's a professional series and a technician series and "never the twain shall meet." But you can't do one without the other. And the techs—again, not everybody, not every archivist—but I think they need to be represented, and they would have a different point of view in terms of opportunities and work from the National Archives. It's representative of the times, where the Archives building was built in DC, the population in DC. Anyway, it's not just the managers. It's not just me. It's the whole agency. I'm sure there are people in the regions that might feel the same way, but what I felt—and we had good relationships—but, you know, there are problems in personnel everywhere. I just think if there's going to be an Oral History Program for the National Archives, it's got to include those kinds of questions about staffing and advancement or who's doing the work and

Stephanie: Right. Yeah.

Brenda: It can't just be management. It can't be.

Stephanie: Mhm. Yeah.

Brenda: But those are different stories. But yeah.

Stephanie: Well, we got where we are based on, you know, built on the people that came before us. So, it wasn't all management. Right?

Brenda: Yeah.

Stephanie: So, yeah. Include the worker bees.

Brenda: Yeah, yeah. And I think that's one of the things with anything. I mean, if you have a job, whether it's moving the records or holdings maintenance, you're working with others doing that. You're giving them assignments to box and rehouse, and you're prodding them.

My supervisor is saying, "Why isn't that done? It's taken three years."

And I'm saying, "Well, you know. They're doing it. It'll get done!" So

Stephanie: Yeah, we'll definitely reach out to others.

Brenda: You're never working alone. You're never working alone.

Stephanie: Mhm. Right. It's all teamwork. Yeah.

Brenda: And so, that's what I would say.

Stephanie: Okay. Well, thank you so much for all of this information, all of your experiences. You really have done a lot of different things and have been at the agency when there's been a lot of change. So, yeah. You've been there a long time!

Brenda: But like I said, the Archives is always in the news, some good and some bad.

Stephanie: Right.

Brenda: For an agency that most people don't think of, it's amazing how much of what is in the news touches the Archives, I think.

Stephanie: Mhm. Yeah, very much so. Okay, well hey, I'm going to go ahead and stop the recording now. Can you hang on for just one moment?

Brenda: Go ahead.

Stephanie: Okay, great. Thank you.

[END RECORDING]