

U.S. NATIONAL ARCHIVES AND RECORDS ADMINISTRATION  
Transcript of National Archives History Office Oral History interview  
Subject: Arlene A. Brown  
Interviewer: Jonathan Dickey  
Date: February 16, 2016

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MR. JONATHAN DICKEY: My name is Jonathan Dickey. I'm an intern with the National Archives and Records Administration History Office. It is 2:00 p.m. on the 16 of February 2016. This interview is being conducted for NARA's Oral History Project at Archives I Volunteers' Office. Can you please state your full name for the record?

MS. ARLENE A. BROWN: Arlene A. Brown.

MR. DICKEY: Okay. State your affiliation to the Archives.

MS. BROWN: I am a volunteer and have been for almost 25 years.

MR. DICKEY: Tell me a little bit about what you did before you started volunteering at the Archives that kind of led to you ending up here.

MS. BROWN: Well, I retired from the federal government in 1988 and my last position was the Deputy Director of Contract Pricing at Headquarters NASA. Before that, I worked as a civilian in Air Force procurement, both here in Washington and for about 15 years before that at Wright-Patterson Air Force Base in Ohio.

MR. DICKEY: Okay. So those positions don't seem at all related to Archives.

MS. BROWN: No.

MR. DICKEY: What made you decide to come here and start doing volunteer work here?

MS. BROWN: Well, to begin with, my major in college was political science with a minor in economics, so I was definitely interested in government and history even before this. When I retired, I was widowed and after a couple of years, I began to look for something to do. And as far as I remember, I think I contacted the Archives. I also contacted the Smithsonian's Museum of American History and the reason I ended up volunteering here and not at the Smithsonian is

their training class did not begin until January and ours here at the Archives began in October. So basically, because I liked the earlier, once I had made up my mind I wanted to do something, I chose the Archives because the training was faster and earlier. [LAUGHTER]

MR. DICKEY: How long was the training?

MS. BROWN: At that time, I don't know what it would be today, but we spent five weeks, five hours a day on I believe every Tuesday and Thursday. I'm trying to remember, but I believe that was ten hours a week for five weeks. Specifically I was training as a docent. Interestingly, the man I married I met in training, although it was docent training, he has never done that volunteer duty as far as I know, but he was in that training class and it was directed at those of us who were interested in becoming docents.

MR. DICKEY: So what kind of things did you learn in the docent class to prepare you for being a docent?

MS. BROWN: Yeah. Well, I think I learned a little bit of history that I might not have known before, but we concentrated on the organization and administration of the National Archives, as I recall, plus a couple of human interest stories, believe it or not, that would help us keep the tourists interested and happy. So I think those were the principal things, at least I remember. It's a long time ago. I know you're supposed to remember in old age those things that happened a long time ago and forget what happened yesterday, but I find it works just the opposite. So the volunteer coordinator at the time led those classes. Her name was Pat Eames, a wonderful woman, very, very knowledgeable and a great teacher. So that's what I remember.

MR. DICKEY: So do you remember what kind of human interest stories they told you at the time?

MS. BROWN: Oh yes. I remember, and I cannot think of his name, but there was a gentleman who was the first Black doctor in one of the military services, I hope it was the army. I think it was the army, and his adventures. He was a very interesting man and I believe it was mainly in Civil War times and I found it [CHUCKLES] I don't remember all the details, but I remember thinking it was very, very interesting and that would be one example of sort of having a story up your sleeve to share with tourists if you, as I did, eventually become a docent.

MR. DICKEY: And did they give you this example because they had documents from this person?

MS. BROWN: Yes. They did have documents. I remember another thing. They distributed, of course, copies, but the police reports from April of 1865 detailing from the police's viewpoint the assassination of Abraham Lincoln, and I thought that was sort of exciting. I really was not that familiar with what was in the National Archives at the time, and so I found jeez, something like a police report from April of 1865, I found very interesting.

MR. DICKEY: So as a docent, do you remember how things worked when you first started being a docent?

MS. BROWN: It was a lot different than today. Basically, we worked from handouts. We really didn't tour the building that much. We went up to what was then the auditorium, located, as I recall, on the fourth or fifth floor, and outside of the auditorium, they always had some sort of examples of documents or something like that. They also had right off the lobby of what was the lobby, you know, this building has changed so from the time it was remodeled and renovated I guess some time in the 1990s, but at that time, right off the lobby, they had a group of volunteers that put together sort of a display of documents. And I think what I remember doing is taking tourists through that exhibit and then going upstairs and taking a look in the auditorium and the various examples of records and documents outside of the auditorium.

And that was the tour. You know, within an hour, I'd be done and I guess I must have a reputation. I think I take more time than any other docent, but I loved it. I mean I'm so interested in it myself, but it was a relatively short tour and as I think back on it, I know it's much more interesting today. Have you been through the exhibit? You know what I mean, much more interesting today.

MR. DICKEY: So when the museum area was remodeled, did you have to receive any additional training?

MS. BROWN: Not formal training. I remember going through once it opened and really walking through it with someone, maybe the curator or whoever had assembled the exhibit, and that continues today. I presume we'll be doing about the same thing when *Amending America* opens, I think March 12. Sometime around the 9th or 10th, all docents are being walked through and they talk about it. And that pretty much, when the new remodeling was completed, we didn't have any formal training the way we had back in 1991 when I started. It was formal training. I think there was something like 20-something people in my class. I believe Gene, my husband, and I and one other, Malcolm, are about the only people left after 25 years, still volunteering.

I hope you're not one of them that come back and are still doing it after 25 years. I hope you're president of some big company by that time. Ah dear. But it's been, I think, to me, just wonderful. I always, even though my background, my working life was spent in Air Force acquisitions, procurement, my father used to joke that, "My daughter is a procurist for the Air Force." In any event, but even though my career was not oriented towards certainly my majors, political science and economics, I always had this love of history and I think more than anything, once I decided I wanted to do something in retirement, outside of feed the cat and have a cup of coffee in the morning, that this was one of my first choices. As I say, the other choice was at the Smithsonian American History Museum, but this has really not much to do with what I did for a living for probably 30 years before I retired.

MR. DICKEY: So the informal training that you receive monthly, is it monthly that you do training as a docent?

MS. BROWN: Well, I don't know what they're doing today. When I started in 1991, I remember it as being twice a week for five hours, morning and afternoon with a break for lunch so that we had a total I guess of 50 hours of training. And it was formal training. We went into a room sort of off the auditorium, but it was a separate room, sat at desks, took notes, were handed out material, so it was formal training.

MR. DICKEY: But as a volunteer, do you still receive training now? So like you have one going next month?

MS. BROWN: Oh. Well, by training, if what you mean is an introduction to new exhibits, yes. We are scheduled, for example, to have training on the new exhibit that's going to open in March. That's this one day. Maybe the curator will walk us through the new exhibit and explain and talk about it, but I don't know. I think there is still formal training for docents. I know the previous volunteer coordinator because so many had, like you, jobs. I think she was doing it after regular hours, that they would come in for a couple of hours. I do not know how long that training was. But I know there was training.

MR. DICKEY: So compared to when you first started as a docent to after the museum was completely put together, how much different is that?

MS. BROWN: Well, I think it certainly makes for a more interesting tour. First of all, they're on their feet and they're walking through the new exhibits and of course it's just such a big variation and some of them are real items. I think it's far more interesting. I've enjoyed it a lot, although like everything, doing it for all these years and now even the new exhibits are old in

the sense they've been around about eight or ten years, it can get repetitious, but the fact there are different people on each tour, some of them extremely knowledgeable with American history, some of them, I say you could almost tell anything and everything.

And a fellow docent who also does Rotunda work on weekends was telling me about the time someone questioned him about which came first, the Declaration or the Constitution. And so you can get people really up to and including college lecturers or professors, so some know a great deal and that's what makes it sort of interesting. I love to teach. It's very interesting to me. I guess I'm very enthused about the subject matter, so that's it.

MR. DICKEY: What would be the most interesting thing that a person that was on one of your tours said or did or asked about?

MS. BROWN: Oh golly. Oh golly. Well, just today, I had two young men from Taiwan plus a couple and their grandchild from Alaska, believe it or not. And the mother, the woman from Alaska at one point said to me, "Oh, I'm so glad we had the tour. I'm learning so much more than if I had just walked it myself." And that makes you feel good. It makes me feel very good.

MR. DICKEY: So the best part is being able to get the feedback from the people?

MS. BROWN: Yes, yes, and giving, I think. As I say, I am now remarried, but as sure, when I was living alone, it was nice to come to the Archives and meet people every week, and that's what I'm basically doing. And since I'm so excited and enthused about American history, to sort of pass on, if I can, that enthusiasm. Maybe I, who knows, go overboard, but I enjoy it.

MR. DICKEY: Okay. So as a docent, you deal pretty much always with the public.

MS. BROWN: Yes. That's pretty much what I have done. Now, when you talk to my husband, as a staff aide, and I think that's more Gene, more my husband, quiet and he can go off in the stacks and be so happy just researching. But I have always, for 25 years, been a docent and I think my two basic joys are really meeting the people and at least hopefully inspiring them, if that's a good word, and getting their enthusiasm up about American history, so.

MR. DICKEY: So you see that museum as an important part of the Archives because it informs people.

MS. BROWN: Well, you know, I don't know. When we think about it there, really, when I started, I think we probably have tripled the number, if not more, the numbers of people who now visit

as a tourist spot the National Archives because of the new exhibits and in fact, many people just come by themselves. I know you can spend hours just going. Usually, almost everything is well-discussed and you don't really need a guided tour to enjoy what's available now. And compared to what we had before, so much depended, I think, on the docent before to make it interesting and educational and fun. Now it's not so much the docent, although I'd like to think so [LAUGHS], that makes it an interesting experience.

MR. DICKEY: Is there anything else that you'd like to say about your time here that we haven't gone over?

MS. BROWN: No, I don't think so. I'm very happy, enjoyed it and I was just thinking today I met the new volunteer coordinator. I've been around so long, she is my third volunteer coordinator and I think the one before her was here at least a decade. And as I said, the woman originally here, Pat Eames, spelled, by the way, E-A-M-E-S, like the Eames chair. I think her husband was a journalist and she wrote some interesting books, but I really enjoyed it. I would miss it and I think, to be honest, I hope you're able to catch it from him. My husband is even more enthusiastic. He has had the fortune of researching some very interesting things and maybe he'll tell you about it, but I don't have anything else to say, but I obviously must enjoy it or I wouldn't be here all these years.

MR. DICKEY: Yes. Well, thank you then.

MS. BROWN: Well, thank you.

MR. DICKEY: And that will be the end of the interview.

MS. BROWN: Well, thank you.

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I, Arlene A. Brown, do hereby give to the National Archives History Office the recordings and transcripts of my interviews conducted on 16 Feb 2016.

I authorize the National Archives History Office to use the recordings and transcripts in such a manner as may best serve the historical objectives of their oral history program.

In making this gift I voluntarily convey ownership of the recording and transcripts to the public domain.

Jonathan Dickey

  
Agent of Receiving Organization

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February 16, 2016

Date