

U.S. NATIONAL ARCHIVES AND RECORDS ADMINISTRATION
Transcript of National Archives History Office Oral History Interview
Subject: Alan Kramer
Interviewer: Stephanie Reynolds
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Stephanie Reynolds: Okay, so I've got the recording going here. I want to thank you for participating in the National Archives Oral History Project. We're documenting the 1973 National Personnel Records Center (NPRC) fire in St. Louis and its impact on the National Archives. My name is Stephanie Reynolds, and I'm based out of our Denver, Colorado, office. I'm assisting the National Archives Historian, Jessie Kratz, on this oral history project. Today is Wednesday, August 9th, 2023, and I'm speaking with Alan Kramer. Okay, Alan, would you just start by telling us a little bit about your background, where you're from, maybe your education, what you were doing before you came to NARA [National Archives and Records Administration]?

Alan Kramer: Immediately before I came to work for the National Archives, I was working as an instructor at the University of Kansas, while I was working on a doctor's degree of history in 1973. When I had pretty well finished all of my academic coursework, I started looking for a job and had applied for a number of government jobs and taken, at that time, the civil service test. I was eventually called in December to work as a temporary [employee] on a project at the civilian building. I talked with the director, who at that time was Warren Griffin, who stopped by and indicated that NPRC would be hiring a number of people in the coming months. In January, I went to work full time as a supervisory, I suppose, archives technician on the fire records recovery efforts at the civilian building. I did that for eight months, until roughly the end of August of 1974, when all of the records that had been freeze-dried had been shipped to the civilian building, and had been recovered and put into a registry system.

Stephanie: Okay. So you were at the NPRC's civilian records center when you started there. So where was that in relation to the NPRC's military records center?

Alan: It was part of the National Personnel Records Center, and the civilian building was in south St. Louis on 111 Winnebago. All of the civilian personnel records of government employees and other tax records were at that location. At the time, they were designated to

serve as one of the two locations where the records recovery would be processed. So there were a number of people there that were involved in it. Lee Gary was the assistant director for civilian records, and Earl Rengstorff was the civilian branch chief, who had oversight of the project. I was a first-line supervisor. We came to have over 100 intermittents who worked on two shifts, a day shift and an evening shift, processing those burned records. That came in what they called "tiger cages," which were about, as I recall, 10 feet high. The cages had big metal bars where the records had been put into the freeze-drying chamber. I think it was in eastern Ohio. Once the records were sufficiently dried, after the initial recovery, they were shipped back to one of the two locations: at the military building or the civilian building. And we would open the cages and then just gradually lift out chunks of records to identify names and service numbers.

Stephanie: So when you started at the National Archives, this was just a few months after the fire. Right? This was in December or so?

Alan: Correct.

Stephanie: Yeah. Okay. Did they—[CROSS TALKING].

Alan: Go ahead.

Stephanie: So did they—you started talking about, you know, kind of the records recovery process there. Did they give you training ahead of time on what to do with these records, or did you have some of this experience coming in?

Alan: No, I didn't really have any experience with that sort of thing. But I think they felt like, given my educational background, they didn't really need to give me training. There were a number of jobs that I had, and I said, "Well, will I be given training on this or that?" The managers indicated, "Oh, no. I'm sure you can figure it out." It wasn't really all that complicated, Stephanie. There weren't that many steps, really. People would take a portion of the burned records and lift them out of the tiger cages. You might take, like, a couple of armfuls of them or handfuls of them, and then basically just start looking through to see if they all were for various veterans, or if it was all a record that was pertaining to one veteran. When you had that identified, you put it in a manila folder, and then put it in a fresh box where it would go into like a keypunch process, when you filled up an entire cardboard box. They had a group of people who did keypunching at the time, in the morning or like a day and an evening shift, I think, as I recall. The keypunch process would then put a registry number on each one of those manila

folders, so that it was possible to identify the veteran by the service number and name. I wasn't given any specific training on it. It was just a fairly simple process of three or four steps.

Stephanie: Okay. And so at this point, you were a day supervisor for this recovery project, is that correct?

Alan: Yes. We started at 7:30 a.m., and my shift was over at 4:00 p.m. There was an evening supervisor to process those records as quickly as possible because, as you could imagine, there were people all across the country already writing inquiries about those World War I and World War II records, and veterans, you know, trying to get military benefits. So managers had two shifts going. The evening supervisor was John Carver.

Stephanie: Okay.

Alan: That was his first government job, too. He came from the private industry, and he and I had known each other earlier. Basically, he was the evening supervisor. I was the day supervisor. We also worked mandatory overtime. When I first went to work there, we worked Saturdays and holidays to try to process those records as quickly as possible.

Stephanie: Wow. Okay.

Alan: It wasn't really an option, but it wasn't that terrible, because I was young, and it wasn't that much of a burden. It was difficult, but we worked holidays and Saturdays to try to get those things processed as quickly as possible.

Stephanie: Okay, so you said the records were freeze-dried. What does that do to the record? Why were they freeze-dried?

Alan: It doesn't do any damage to the record. When the records were taken off the sixth floor, they were wet, because the fire had burned for days and days, and the fire department continued to spray water onto the sixth floor. The records that were recovered were all damp and various degrees of wet. NARA managers tried something that was relatively new at the time, and you probably know about it. The NARA managers shipped those records to a freeze-drying chamber. That was, I think, part of—I'm not quite sure at this point. I don't recall. But it was a large freeze-drying chamber, where you could drive large, large groups of records into the chamber, and then it would be sealed, and the moisture would be gradually withdrawn, because it created a vacuum, which took the moisture out of the records. Once

they reached a sufficient level of dryness, the records were ready to be shipped back to St. Louis. It was called a freeze-drying process. It was actually more of a vacuum-drying process, although in the process of drying the records, I think they may have been actually frozen to draw the moisture out of them.

Stephanie: And then when they arrived at the Civilian Personnel Records Center, they were dry, but they could still be moldy or discolored or—?

Alan: Well, they were moldy and brittle records, but the mold had been deactivated, or should be. I guess it was dormant, because the records were dry. If they had remained wet, the mold would have continued to grow. But by being dry, the mold spores that were on the records were inactive. As long as they remained dry and cool and not in a high level of humidity, the mold spores were just basically inactive. And that was one of the reasons they were put back into air conditioning, and why they're kept under environmental controls now, in St. Louis, once they've become archival. There were brittle edges on them, and part of the process was to start to shake the brittle edges off until you got something that was the core of the page, and that was what was put into the manila folder. A lot of brittle crumbles fell off the records once they started to be handled.

Stephanie: Were all of these shipped to NPRC's Civilian Personnel Records Center? Or did some of these go back to NPRC's Military Personnel Records Center?

Alan: About half of them were sent to the civilian records building, which was part of the National Personnel Records Center. The other half was sent to the military personnel records building, which both parts comprise the National Personnel Records Center, much as it is today in St. Louis. So there was, like, a 50-50 division, I guess, close to that, where half of the records went back to the civilian building, and half of them went back to the military building.

Stephanie: Okay. And this is just for space reasons?

Alan: Yes. [CROSS TALKING] They didn't have enough room at either building to do all the records because, as I said, they took one of the bays in the civilian building and took the records down off the shelves and took the shelving down so that you had open space to work at tables. We had over 100 people. I think that the military building probably had close to the same number of people, who came in on an intermittent basis. They were mostly students, and they came in at various times during the day and processed the records. They were not full-time

employees. They were hired specifically for the project. A lot of them want to work full time for the government because they were students.

Stephanie: Okay. And then they were putting these freeze-dried or vacuum-dried records, you said, into manila folders.

Alan: Yeah, they were like typical manila folders you deal with, you know, whatever. They are 8 1/2 by 11 inches. It was just a small fragment. They also had a smaller envelope that was, like, a half-envelope, and you could drop portions of records in—if there was just this very small, one document, they would drop them into a half-file. And so you had the two different types of manila folders, the full-size and the half-size, but they were the same kinds of manila folders that you see today on your desk, probably.

Stephanie: And then were those being entered into a system, like, for data entry? Were they being entered into a system at that time, or was that done later?

Alan: No, no. It was part of the process. Once you got a cardboard box—and they were, like, records center boxes full of files, because as you gradually processed them during the time you were there, you would fill up a box with the manila folders from front to back or from back to front. When you finished a box, and it was full of recovered records, they were sent to keypunch, and the keypunch people worked, then, subsequent to that recovery process and entered it into a registry system. So it was pretty much, if the record was recovered one day, within a couple of days after that, they were entered into the registry system by being punched. Does that make sense? It wasn't simultaneous. It was two steps in the process: the recovery and folderizing, putting it into a box, and then when the box was full, sending that box into keypunch where there were probably, I think, between 25 and 30 people who worked full time keypunching those records and putting them into a registry system.

Stephanie: Okay. And you had to supervise this entire process?

Alan: No, I supervised the recovery and the boxing process. Once it went into the keypunch operator, it was handled by a different supervisor.

Stephanie: I see. Do you know what kind of information they were putting in that registry system? I know that was on the other side, but what information were they putting in there?

Alan: I knew what they were putting in. They were putting in the person's name and their service number, or the name and Social Security number, whatever could be identified on that record in terms of the name, service number, or Social Security number. And if you had a partial record with the name and a date of birth, but you didn't have a service number on that document, you underlined the birth date so that it was, name and birth date, or name and service number. Then that was put into the registry file, which was computerized, and then it was assigned to a registry location so that you could search them by their registry location.

Stephanie: I see. So kind of whatever information they can pull from that record.

Alan: Yes. Whatever you pull from the recovered portion of it. In some cases, you know, the service number was burned up. So they didn't have that. But you had portions of documents with the man's name and birth date. I'm saying men—it was mostly men—and birthdate and his name. Then you put that into the registry. If you had a service number, so much the better.

Stephanie: Okay. Now, these records, you said that there's sometimes fragments there. They can be brittle. They obviously had gone through some damage there. Are there any sort of precautions that the intermittent staff had to take when they're handling these records?

Alan: I guess, to be as careful as possible. But pretty much their job is to basically identify a name, a service number, a date of birth, and to start to shake the brittle, completely burned, you know, edges off the record, because some of the records were pretty much intact. But there would be like a half-an-inch or an inch of burn around the edges. You basically sort of shuffled that off the record, or kind of shook it off the record, or brushed it off the record before you put it into the manila folder. At the end of the day, the floor was littered with brown ash from these burned papers. It was really a filthy job that, you know, you didn't particularly wear your best clothing to do that, certainly not like you're dressed, probably, today. Most of the guys were, you know, in very casual, older clothes and, you know, t-shirts and stuff like that. People didn't dress up. So it was a very dirty job. And sometimes you got covered with soot by the end of the day.

Stephanie: Mm. Did they have to wear masks or gloves or anything like that for health reasons?

Alan: In some cases, the people wore masks to keep from inhaling ashes. Also, some people who were very sensitive to it would wear plastic gloves. Not everybody did that, because it was sometimes kind of difficult to work in latex gloves. But they weren't handled quite as carefully as if a preservation person, who has been trained in preservation, is handling the record now. I

mean, the way the records are handled now, by the people who are actively involved in archival preservation, is much more carefully [done] than those records [were]. But the essence of the project was to try to process as many records as possible as quickly as possible, so that we could get a portion of the information back online to answer inquiries.

Stephanie: Okay.

Alan: At the time, Stephanie, those were not yet accessioned records into the National Archives. They were just in our physical custody. They were still in the legal custody of the Department of the Defense [DOD].

Stephanie: So these were not considered, at the time, permanent records that would be accessioned into the National Archives?

Alan: That's correct. They were not permanent. They were considered—geez, what's the archival term for that? Um, they were—[CROSS TALKING].

Stephanie: Temporary?

Alan: They were unscheduled. They weren't considered temporary, and they weren't considered permanent. They were just considered unscheduled. I think part of the process involved, subsequent to that, was to negotiate with the DOD the length of time before they would be accessioned by the National Archives.

Stephanie: Okay. So then at what point—you said that you became a management analyst? At what point were you hired into that position?

Alan: That was late August or early September 1974. There were a number of management staff positions that were open, and since the project was winding down and, obviously, I needed another job where I would either be assigned to correspondence or some kind of job, and I applied for a management analyst job. And so I went into that position. Then in September, which was initially when I was the supervisory archives technician, I was a [GS-]5. And then when I went into that management analyst series, I guess, much as it is now, it was like a [GS-]5/7/9.

Stephanie: Okay. And you said—[CROSS TALKING].

Alan: So that was when I joined the management staff.

Stephanie: Okay. So previous to that, you said that the other project was winding down when you applied for this position. So you're saying that all of those records that had been damaged, by that time then, were already in the registry system, and they were re-boxed or...[CROSSTALKING]. So that just lasted a few months?

Alan: Yes. So it took the process of working at both of the buildings and working, you know, two shifts. So pretty much by August, it was finished at both of the buildings. Now, I wasn't at the military building, so I don't know. It may have gone on for a couple more weeks there, or it may have already been finished. But pretty much by the end of August, after having worked with this, you know, the freeze-dried records for eight months, they were pretty much processed into the registry system, and they were all kept at Page [9700 Page Avenue, St. Louis]. So the ones that were at the civilian building were shipped back to the military building. The ones that were processed at the military building just remained there, because the registry files were all at the military building, where they would be referenced by people who were familiar with military records. They didn't keep them in the civilian building after they had been processed.

Stephanie: Okay. Wow. That seems like it was a pretty efficient process. It went pretty quickly.

Alan: It went pretty quickly, because there were a lot of people involved in it. As I said, we had over 100 intermittents who worked for us. So it was a very large staff. There were not that many supervisors involved in the process, so we were spread pretty thin. There were a lot of intermittents who came and went and processed records. It was all finished pretty much within eight months. But, frankly, after having been working with burned and sooty records, and looking a bit like Pigpen, by the end of the day—the character from *Peanuts*, if you're not familiar with that—we were ready to be done with the project. [LAUGHS]

Stephanie: I bet. So as the management analyst, were you still at the civilian facility, or are you now over at the military facility?

Alan: I was at the military building on most days, and occasionally I worked at the civilian building, if there was a project. But when I worked on the records monograph for the recovery process, I was only at the military building, because, I believe, most of the resources for that were already at the military building that we used, like pay vouchers and morning reports and

all that sort of thing. That was at the military building. So once I started on that monograph, I was just pretty much exclusively at the military building.

Stephanie: Can you talk about the monograph? I know that you compiled this directory of sources, so maybe just describe what you were doing with that, and what the end result was.

Alan: Well, we were trying to list every possible source of information for records recovery or, you know, verification of information that could be used to verify military service, like the pay vouchers and the morning reports and sick reports and a lot of those things. So, let me look at the date here. I finished that, I guess, by July of 1975, because that's the date that's on the monograph. And it lists the microfilm records, the paper records. And then part of it is also where there were state resources that people could write to. So it was divided kind of by chapters, and it was also divided by World War I and World War II sources of information. So there's [CROSS TALKING].

Stephanie: Go ahead.

Alan: Pardon?

Stephanie: Oh, go ahead.

Alan: The sources—some of them were still in the states. There were sources of medical information, too, from clinical records. So I tried to list all those, too. But by the time I got done, there were literally hundreds of alternate sources that you could go through to try to verify military service or the character of military service, and also verification of states that had collected separation documents that you could write to so far. The states were willing to assist you in sending back information, and sometimes copies of the DD form 214 that was issued to the veteran when he was released from service. There were also things like the court-martial records that were in Suitland, Maryland. If there was a suspicion that the veteran had been court-martialed or received less than honorable service, you could go to those court-martial records. So, does that give you a little bit of the flavor of that monograph? It was given as— [CROSS TALKING].

Stephanie: These were sources that were...

Alan: Yes, it was compiled like a training document for the people who came into the records reconstruction process. There were a lot of college graduates that were hired. Some of them were college people who had had some college and maybe had not finished a degree. There were literally, I think, several hundred that were hired for the course of, like, February through the summer of '74, because a lot of the people who had been World War II veterans—and when I say World War II veterans, the people who had come into the records center after World War II were 55 and 60 [years old], and they already had 30 years of service. So, they left at that time having had a sufficient number of years of service. At that time, people were—the civilians at the military building, certainly, and the ones at the civilian building were more inclined to retire at age 55 and then go on to some other endeavor in their lives. It was really much less common that people worked much beyond 55. There were large numbers of people that left in '73 and '74 and '75 and were replaced with younger people in the Records Reconstruction Branch. When I went to work there, they had about 125 people at the time working in that area, the Records Reconstruction Branch, and it was the largest branch at the military building. There was an Air Force branch that was much smaller, an Army branch that was subsequent to the fire, and a Navy branch. But the Records Reconstruction Branch was the largest in terms of personnel.

Stephanie: This was established after the recovery process at some point?

Alan: Yes, it was established in 1974, as the records came back into the registry system. There were some people who were working in other parts of the center who were reassigned to the branch. There were also new people who came in from the private sector who came to work in the Records Reconstruction Branch. It gradually grew in '74 and '75 as more people were trained and worked in that area and the number of requests built up, due to the publicity from the fire. In addition, a lot of the World War II veterans, at that point, were in their 50s and 60s, and people were writing to try to get, you know, copies of the medals or medals that their father had lost or misplaced. There were men that were going to the VA [Department of Veterans Affairs] for the first time to try to get medical assistance, and they had misplaced their separation documents. So there were thousands of inquiries. Those records were also used by local police agencies and federal agencies that were verifying military service.

Stephanie: And so the Records Reconstruction Branch is more about—you're not so much piecing fragments together. You're using these alternate sources to, basically, kind of recreate the information that was on the original record?

Alan: Yes. Both. They used the fragments if there were fragments or portions of records. In some cases, you were really lucky, you found almost a whole [record] when they pulled from the file. It was almost a complete record. Obviously, some of the records that were recovered from the fire were complete records. If the man—and this is getting really detailed—if the man's record was filed, probably in a box that was on the bottom shelf, chances are it was almost a whole record, because as the records exfoliated during the fire, and as the water was poured onto the fire, the records that fell off in the aisle made sort of a barrier so that, if you were one of the lucky people and your record was in a file on the bottom shelf, chances are your record wasn't too seriously damaged. It was just wet. Does that make sense?

Stephanie: Interesting. Yes.

Alan: [As the] fire burned, it exfoliated the front of the box. And then records came loose and fell down to the floor, and the fire department poured water on the fire. It collected on the floor and made sort of like a protective barrier for some of the bottom boxes. So, if you were on the bottom shelf, all through the sixth floor, chances are your record was mostly not burned, just wet. Or it might have just a little fringe around the edge, because those boxes basically were almost intact. But the ones on the top shelf, if you were unfortunate enough to be in the top shelf, those were almost completely lost, because they were the boxes exfoliated, and that's where there was the most fire and the least amount of water. So that was something that when you got an inquiry, you might be lucky enough to get almost a complete record, or you might be unlucky enough to only get like a name or a service number or something like that, some little tiny fragment, in which case you had to go back through a much longer reconstruction process and write to state agencies or pull pay vouchers and different kinds of things or go to morning reports.

So there were people that were specialists in the branch in just servicing the morning reports, and they sat all day long at readers and looked up information that was on microfilm, because the morning reports had been microfilmed, and the sick reports had been microfilmed. So there were people who actually sat in front of a reader. I'm assuming they still have those in the Archives. And that was an incredible job, because it was difficult to watch those images flying past the front of your eyes for eight hours a day, as you can imagine.

Stephanie: Yes. [LAUGHS]

Alan: Have you ever used one of those machines?

Stephanie: I have. Yes. And I know exactly what you're talking about.

Alan: People used to sometimes fall asleep, because it was so difficult to focus your eyes hour after hour on the screen. And I never was that upset with them when I would walk through the aisles if somebody dozed off, because it was hard as heck to be alert for eight hours a day, looking at all those images flashing past your eyes.

Stephanie: Right. Did you work with, or did someone at NARA work with, the military services to determine which records could be used to help reconstruct the military record?

Alan: No, not really. We mostly knew things that were available and gathered information, and we had the pay vouchers in St. Louis. They knew that the court-martial records were in Washington [D.C.], and we had copies of all the morning reports from World War II and World War I that were already on microfilm there. They hadn't been used as much, but once the fire occurred, and you had to use them more frequently, we had access to all that kind of thing. And I can't say that, as far as I know, that they dealt a lot with the military to ask for other sources, because I'm not sure that the military knew of any more sources for, like, World War I and World War II that, you know, the military is more focused on the present day—the branches of the service, as opposed to historical records. There may have been some contact with the Archives [and] the Army and Navy and the Air Force to see if there were sources that they knew about that we didn't have. But that wasn't a real frequent kind of interaction, I don't think.

Stephanie: Okay. So as the records reconstruction branch chief, what were your responsibilities? Were you overseeing the staff using that monograph that you had put together? Or what were your responsibilities as the branch chief?

Alan: Well, my overall responsibilities were to try to manage the flow of work and the answering of inquiries. If there were unusual complaints or congressionals, because as you currently have, you have congressmen writing to the National Archives specifically on behalf of their constituents. So my job was to manage the personnel, the flow of work through the branch, and to ensure that the oldest inquiries were processed first. That was part of the management process, to ensure that the people were working on the oldest inquiries as opposed to the newest inquiries. The way they do it now, I think, is separated more by the type of inquiry. But at the time, all the inquiries were treated the same, and they were all handled by the date they were submitted so that you were always working on the oldest cases first to try to answer those after the veterans or the federal agencies or whomever had written or contacted the Archives.

So it was more of a workflow management thing and personnel management. When you lost people, then [you had] to be involved in the interview and hiring of new people. As you can expect, when you had 120-some people, there were always people that were promoted or were leaving to take other jobs in the federal agencies. You [were] constantly involved in recruiting and interviewing and training. So, that was all of those functions. It was more of management, as opposed to actually being involved with inquiries. But, if there were sensitive inquiries, I got involved in those, and sometimes I would get personal calls from people who called in and managed to get hold of the branch chief.

Stephanie: Do you know how many inquiries were coming in at the time, I don't know, say per week or per month or so?

Alan: On an annual basis, it was several hundred thousand that we processed. So, sometimes, it was several thousand a day that we received.

Stephanie: Wow.

Alan: There were certain days when you had heavier receipts, like Mondays, because it would build up at the post office over the weekends, and you might get, you know, like a thousand inquiries in one day. But, generally, it was, you know, between several hundred and a thousand inquiries you got everyday. So that, at the end of the year, we had processed several hundred thousand inquiries. I can't recall, I'm sorry, the exact number, but there were generally between 200,000 and 300,000, I think, that we processed in the course of the year.

Stephanie: And when you say that you've processed them, so there's this whole process going on behind the scenes, then, to recreate that information, right? I mean, the staff working on, like, mold remediation if they need to, or are they piecing things together? What are they doing exactly to process those?

Alan: Well, they were getting the—if there were multiple or one B-file [Burn file], that was pulled from the file, initially, and then you looked at what the inquiry was seeking, like maybe verification of military service, so you might have had to go to pay vouchers then or to morning reports to answer that inquiry. That was the purpose of the branch, to answer inquiries from veterans and federal agencies and state agencies that were seeking to verify the character and length of a man's military service. If it was possible, we would also try to—for those people who wanted to verify the medals that they were entitled to, then those actually were referred to the department for actual issuance of the medal. So that, as I recall, like the Department of [the]

Navy or the Department of [the] Air Force would then issue, actually, the medals based on the information that we were able to put back together. But the purpose of the branch was to assemble information required to answer the inquiry. There wasn't any particular archival—I always thought there should be, but at the time, there weren't the resources. There wasn't an archival portion to it. You just handled the record, basically by people who are not trained in preservation techniques, and if there was damage on the record, you sort of brushed off the burned parts as well as you could. And there wasn't anything done at that time to enhance preservation, because the records were still unscheduled, and the Archives didn't treat them as being permanent records, because they really weren't. Everybody thought they would become permanent records, but at the time, they were unscheduled, so there weren't any preservation efforts made as part of that reconstruction process.

Stephanie: Okay. So, whether the staff were working with the original record, or if they're doing that research, you know, through the other sources that they could use to reconstruct that record, it's taking quite a while, it sounds like, or at least it seems like it would take quite a while, for each request that came in to compile that information, right?

Alan: In some cases, yes. If you had to go to a state agency or write to them, it took weeks, because you would send out an inquiry, and you'd have to put the record in the inquiry into suspense on your desk. And then it might be weeks before the state agency gets back to you. If you needed pay vouchers, you had to put the record into suspense on your desk until the people who were working in search could go out and pull the pay voucher, because everybody didn't run out into the file areas to pull pay vouchers. There were people that were specifically trained in that, and they would pull the pay vouchers and then route them to the person who was working on that inquiry. So you married up the information. So to answer your question, yes, it sometimes did take weeks or even months to answer an inquiry once it had come onto your desk. In other cases, you had a complete record. You could answer it that day. So it varied widely, you know. And, in other cases, if you had to get some kind of a specific detail—if the person was alleging they were injured at a certain place, you would send the record to the OR—Organizational Records—where they would look at morning reports or sick reports to verify information printed out from the microfilm and then send it back to the correspondence person to be married up with the record, so the correspondence clerk could answer the inquiry. Again, there were delays in that, because the OR people had a backlog of work, which could take several days or a week, or more than a week, to act [respond] to the person in correspondence, who was working in the same general area of the building but was, you know, more confined to correspondence as opposed to working with organizational records, because some of the people were simply better at that organizational-type search with microfilm; it tended to be the older, more experienced employees who were good at that.

Stephanie: Well, it's just amazing that the branch was able to process, you said, 200,000 or 300,000 requests a year when there is so much work going on behind the scenes, and you're still able to process that many. That's wonderful!

Alan: Oh yeah. Well, at the time, I think our customers didn't think it was wonderful, because there were long delays in answering their inquiries. So it was—we were doing the best we could with the resources we had in reassembling info—and see, that's why I'm talking about records reconstruction. You're actually not reconstructing the original record. You're assembling information. I was thinking about this the other day. A more accurate title for the branch would have been like the “information assembly branch,” where they were putting information back together about the veteran and his service as opposed to actually reconstructing the original records, which you couldn't do. But it was a little bit easier for people to understand records reconstruction better than any other title. So that was, I guess, what the managers at the time settled on.

Stephanie: Were there any letters or phone calls where, you know, where some of the patrons were upset, that you had to handle those types...?

Alan: Oh, yeah. A lot of time—well, there were section chiefs in correspondence, and they handled some of the complaints. You did get the telephone complaints. In many cases, the veteran would be upset if there were long delays. The veteran would write to his congressman, and then the congressman's office would write in and say, “We need to...,” you know, this or that. Those inquiries were handled as a priority because, of course, you didn't want to offend the people in Congress. Very often then, you would be working on—there would be people that would actually be working on the original inquiry from the veteran, who then became involved in the congressional—to try to answer the congressman's office. So they tried to handle those with more priority, but often, it took about as long to answer those as it would have initially to the veteran or to the Veterans Administration, or to whomever wrote in, because you simply couldn't make the process happen overnight. In some cases, I guess, the supervisors were able to call the state agencies or call the Veterans Administration, if they wanted to retrieve medical records to try to speed the process up a little bit. But there was only a certain amount of things you could do to speed up the process.

Stephanie: Right. Yeah, it sounds like it was as efficient as it could be. And maybe just the patrons, the veterans or whoever was asking for the information, just didn't understand the behind-the-scenes kind of work that's going on that needed to be done.

Alan: That's correct. There's a perception that all the records had been microfilmed, and all you had to do was then pull the microfilm to service that. There were any number of times people called me, as the branch chief—I was only the branch chief there for a couple of years before I left to go to Suitland—but there were any number of times people said, "Well, weren't all those records microfilmed and across the street?" I don't know where that perception came from, but I heard that many, many times. I said, "I wish the records had been microfilmed. I wish there had been duplicates of the records, but the records were original, and the original was in the building on the sixth floor." So most of the records were on the sixth floor. There were some on a couple of other floors that didn't get damaged by the fire, but I said, "The records were in the original only. They were not microfilmed." The military departments didn't go to the expense of making a duplicate. The paper record was retired and turned over to the physical custody of the National Archives.

Stephanie: At this time, were you also presenting at various venues, at various places, on the process of reconstructing these records?

Alan: Yes. And yes, occasionally, we were called to veterans' meetings or to some public—there weren't a lot of instances of that. And in some cases, the assistant director took care—for military records, [he] would handle that. But if it happened during the course of the year, yes. It was just part of an assignment that you got, and you were out of the building, you know, for a day or for a portion of a week. So it went on simultaneously. And it even happened after I left there. I know there were a couple of times when there were military organizations in the Washington area that wanted to have a representative from NARA come to talk about the fire and the recovery of records. And, I know, a couple of times, I went to Alexandria and so forth because I was on the scene, and people knew that I'd been involved in the process virtually from the beginning. It's a shame there—are you aware of any of the people who talked about the actual work of recovering the records from the sixth floor?

Stephanie: A couple.

Alan: Okay, good. I wasn't involved in that part of the process. Those people were people who were already actively NARA employees. And I'm saying NARA, you know. At that time, it was NARS, the National Archives and Records Service. We were part of the GSA, unfortunately, in 1973. And there were people who went onto the sixth floor and actually recovered the records from the floors and the boxes and the shelves. I wasn't involved in that process, so I was kind of in the second step, once the records had been dried and were sent back to either Page or to

Winnebago. But one of the men who handled that, unfortunately, is deceased. It's a shame you didn't have the chance to talk with him. But Cliff Ambler was the supervisor who worked on the sixth floor and actually recovered records from—you know, that were wet once the fire was out, and they were able to go back on the sixth floor and start moving those records out onto the parking lot under tents, so they could start the drying process. I, unfortunately, wasn't involved in that, or else I would have been involved in every step of the process.

Stephanie: So was he also involved, then, in going around to various places to kind of talk about this process?

Alan: Oh, Cliff then went into correspondence on current Air Force records and worked in the Air Force and then Air Force Reference Branch. And then subsequent to that, he left and went to work at the Chicago Records Center and then San Francisco and then Boston. He was all over the country. But after his initial work on the sixth floor in the recovery [of records], immediately following the fire, and when the fire was out, and it was safe to go back onto the sixth floor, he didn't work in the subsequent steps.

Stephanie: Okay. And in terms of you and others that were going out, it sounds like organizations would invite NARA staff to go talk to them about this process?

Alan: Yeah. If it was a veterans' organization, I think—one time I remember going to a VA hospital in Hannibal and another time to, like, a Purple Heart organization in Alexandria. They would write to the National Archives and ask if there was someone available that could come and talk to a group, on a certain date at a certain time, about the records, you know, the records that were recovered and what was available and how the inquiries were answered. When I spoke at that conference at the University of Iowa, I met one of the ladies who subsequently became one of the great preservationists, Mary Lynn Ritzenthaler, who was actually involved in some of the preservation for the Declaration of Independence. But that was a preservation conference. And so they talked about how you recovered records. And at the time, that freeze-drying or vacuum-drying process was first really on a large scale. It was pioneered in 1973 after the fire. Before that, that process had really not been used or explored too widely when paper records were wet, and because the technology wasn't available to do that.

Stephanie: Interesting. So you did mention a minute ago about NARA or NARS, at that time, being part of the General Services Administration [GSA].

Alan: Yes.

Stephanie: So, I believe it was in 1985 when they separated out and became an independent agency. So let's see here. I think you would have been in the Reconstruction Branch then. Did you notice any changes when that occurred?

Alan: No, I didn't. I was already in Washington when that occurred. And when they celebrated the independence, I was already the assistant director or the deputy director at the Washington National Records Center. So I was in Suitland, and there was a large celebration at Archives at that—well, what we subsequently called Archives I, which was the building downtown at the time. We didn't have Archives II in College Park. Have you been to that building?

Stephanie: At College Park? Yes.

Alan: Yeah. That building didn't, I think, come online until, like, 1993 or 1994. So there was just the original Archives building, and they had a big celebration in the Rotunda at Archives I when they celebrated independence day. And I, as the assistant director at Suitland, was invited to attend that. So I was very fortunate. I mean, it was one of the first things I did when I went to Washington, because I went there in May of 1984. So I got there in time to celebrate the independence.

Stephanie: Well, that's pretty neat.

Alan: Oh, it was very neat, because we were all very restive under GSA. They didn't particularly like the National Archives, because they considered us to be sort of, like, intellectually snobbish persons, and the GSA resented us greatly. You know, I don't know what your educational background is, but mostly the National Archives people were at the higher levels. Management levels were college graduates and had advanced degrees. So they did think of us as being, sort of, snobbish and intellectually superior. And I suppose we conveyed that, too, because I think we felt like a lot of the people in GSA were sort of stupid, frankly. I guess I treated them like that, too, so I probably fell into that trap. But we were greatly relieved, because I think most people at the National Archives and Records Service felt that we never should have been part of the General Services Administration to begin with. We were a cultural agency, as opposed to being, like, a service agency that serviced other parts of the government. We did do that too, though.

Stephanie: Did you notice a transition period when the agency did become independent?

Alan: At the transition, which was in 1984 and 1985, there was a lot more publicity. It was kind of odd, but GSA, I think, always tried to keep NARA/NARS as, sort of, subservient and not involved in publicity so much. So basically, I think there was sort of a new sense that we needed to advertise to the American people our services and the fact that we were an agency that kept government records and so forth, and to try to establish a more independent identity and more of a recognized identity nationwide. So yeah, there was a definite transition period, and that went on for years, because as they gradually added more and more people that were involved in those kind of processes, we had more of an outreach to the federal community and to the public than we were ever allowed to have when we were part of the General Services Administration. A lot of what's involved, actually, in establishing that, in the types of activities you're involved in [federal agency records management inspections], we weren't encouraged to go out into federal agencies and review their records practices and things like that when we were part of NARS.

Stephanie: Okay.

Alan: You know, I'm not sure how long you've been with records management, but that was something that kind of grew in the years subsequent to that where we, sort of, took a more active role in trying to go out, establish good records management processes in the federal agencies.

Stephanie: Okay. So I mean, that's understandable...to take a few years or so to really get, you know, get your feet under you and figure out what is the mission and what do we need to do as an agency.

Alan: Yeah, there was more of a redefinition of the agency's mission.

Stephanie: And so you said that when this occurred, when the agency separated from GSA, you were the deputy director of the Washington National Records Center. Is that correct?

Alan: Yes. I went to work there in May of 1984. So I was already in Washington at that time.

Stephanie: Okay. What were some of your responsibilities?

Alan: Well, I had, sort of, the same responsibilities as a branch chief, only much more so, because I had responsibility for the building, for staffing, for management of the workload, for recruiting and the whole management of a large entity. I spent a lot of time with outreach to federal agencies talking to them about, you know, records. I wasn't so much a strong records management person, but that was a focus of part of our outreach. When you would talk to the agencies about their records and how they were managed, and how they were retired, and so forth like that, there was an outreach focus as the assistant director. And then there was also a lot of time spent managing the building, because there were a lot of facility problems at Suitland, as there continued to be through the years, you know—leaking roofs and hot areas and air conditioning issues and termites in the stack areas and all kinds of things like that, that I was involved in—that just really basically ate up your day. And then, of course, there was employee discipline and recruiting and just the whole range of activities. I wasn't so much involved in answering inquiries from the federal agencies that had records there. But if there was a problem, then I got a telephone call from the Selective Service or the other agencies, daily. We had a lot of DOE [Department of Energy] records. And there was also involvement in overseeing classified records, because that's a large repository for classified records. In fact, it's the largest one for any of the Federal Records Centers. I think, right now, there are only a couple of them that keep classified records at all, maybe Seattle and Suitland. Other than that, I think all the classified areas have been closed down in other records centers.

Stephanie: I talked to a former director of a Presidential Library, and that came up. It sounds like the NARA facilities are sending the classified records to the Washington National Records Center. It sounds like they're consolidating them there. Is that right?

Alan: Yeah. That was a consolidation that went on, really, after 1996, because when they set up the revolving fund, the director of the revolving fund didn't want to pay for all those clearances, and all the special, you know, bells and whistles for vaults and things like that at a lot of the regional centers. So they were encouraged to, or told to, send their classified records to Suitland, where they were consolidated into three large vaults that we had there. And that process went from '96 to the time when I became the director of the Washington National Records Center later. I was reassigned to be the director there in 2000.

Stephanie: So at that point, were you over the entire federal records center operations or...?

Alan: I was for a time. And that was from about '90 through '96. I was the director of all the regional record centers, and our office was on K Street, and then subsequently, at Archives II, once they opened that facility and closed the K Street offices. And then after that, I was

reassigned to be the director at the Washington National Records Center, which I did in the last, I guess, 10 years of my career.

Stephanie: Wow. What kind of decisions go into running the entire federal records center system?

Alan: The biggest thing that we had at the central office was management of the budget, at that time, because each of the centers had a budget that you had to very carefully monitor staffing and budget throughout the year to ensure that you didn't exceed what we were appropriated, in which case, we would have been, you know, technically in default, in violation of, I guess, whatever act controls that—and also to manage the reimbursable activities that we did, like, for the IRS, because most of the work that we did for the IRS, including the storage and all the reference, was a reimbursable function that involved transfer of millions of dollars from the IRS to NARA in the Federal Records Centers to maintain their records and to service them, because at that time, in the '90s, they were very heavily referenced, and there would be, like, maybe 16 or 17 million reference requests in the course of a year, for IRS records, because they were all paper. There were very few electronic records. And so, any time there was a subsequent audit or an inquiry from the person, you had to go back and pull the IRS tax records for that particular year and that particular person, and those IRS records were very heavily referenced.

Stephanie: Wow. Yeah, that sounds kind of complicated. And there's a lot involved in everything that you had to do with that.

Alan: Yes. Well, it involved a lot of constant, daily contact with the Internal Revenue Service [IRS] about their inquiries and money and so forth like that. So I dealt with—I had a liaison with the IRS, Peggy Fitzpatrick, and I dealt with her, basically, multiple times during the day, because that was a very large interaction with the Internal Revenue Service. And then we also had that kind of activity with the Social Security Administration. We kept a lot of their records, and that also was a reimbursable activity. So, I had a lot of interaction with them, too. And then a lot of it wasn't just involved in the space management, because, Stephanie, there was constant pressure to get more storage areas, because our holdings of paper records continue to grow each year. So I was involved in procurement of additional storage areas like in Dayton, where we went from one building to four. Just to manage all that—and, also, to get additional annexes in various locations. I think, at one time, Denver had an annex.

Stephanie: I'm not sure.

Alan: Fort Worth also had multiple locations.

Stephanie: Okay. Yeah. Do you think, over time, this will slow down with that Presidential memo [M-19-21/M-23-07] that came out?

Alan: Yes. Well, that really will drastically—yes. It's already happened, because in the last 10 years, the IRS, as you know, converted to electronic records, and you probably file your tax return electronically. Well, that is all they kept. And the Internal Revenue Service keeps those electronic records. So gradually the volume of paper has diminished, and you need less and less and fewer storage areas for all those internal revenue records. And the same thing has happened for Social Security. So as agencies have converted to electronic records over the last—and I'm kind of out of the loop, because I've been retired for over 10 years—but as agencies have converted to electronic records, there have been fewer and fewer—there's fewer and fewer need for storage of textual records. And I think, at one time, Denver was much, much larger in terms of its holdings, because it kept all the paper records from Ogden. So I think if you look at the Denver Records Center, it's much, much smaller now than it was, say, back in the '90s.

Stephanie: Interesting. Well, we have a new facility now north of Denver.

Alan: Well, also, as you mentioned, too, under the Archivist Ferriero, they decided that they did not want to take any more textual records. So that, also, is going to have a very dramatic effect and downsizing of the record center system, because there won't be paper records coming into most locations. Suitland, though, will remain large, because a lot of the pre-archival records are stored there. And when I was the director, we looked at projections, and there would be large amounts of paper records stored there through 2050, because so many of those pre-archival, or records that were scheduled permanent, had really long retentions, before they would be turned over to the National Archives.

Stephanie: Okay. They're like permanent, or they're really long-term temporary?

Alan: Oh, yes. Well, there were some long-term temporary, but there were also a lot of long-term records that were considered to be permanent, where the agencies would retain legal custody for, like, 50 years or 60 years before it was turned over to NARA.

Stephanie: Yeah. So, they'll be there for a while. [LAUGHS]

Alan: Oh, yeah. Suitland will be there for a long time. It'll be one of the last record centers to close. The St. Louis military building, I guess, will never close, because they're getting electronic military records to service. So they will continue their correspondence functions for the foreseeable future.

Stephanie: You said that you've been retired for how long?

Alan: I retired in 2011.

Stephanie: Do you remember what that day was like?

Alan: What? Pardon? What that day was like?

Stephanie: Yeah. Do you have memories of, you know, did someone throw you a party, or did they do anything special for you when you retired?

Alan: I tried to keep it as low as possible, and keep it a low-key thing. And there was a small reception at the Washington National Records Center. But it was during the Christmas holidays that carried over into January. So, mostly, there were a handful of people there from the building and a few people from the central office who came out. But, for the most part, most of the senior management people were on leave for the holidays, which was okay. I didn't want a large celebration or anything like that, because sometimes some of the things that are said at those kinds of anniversary or retirement parties are not things that people felt all along, up through your career. And, at the end, it seemed like there was a certain amount of insincerity, and I just didn't particularly care for that. And I didn't really feel like I wanted to have that kind of a big celebration or anything like that. I wanted to, just, sort of keep it. So I sent out an announcement to a lot of the people that I'd worked with in the regions. The people I worked with in Central Office, said that I'd worked for NARA, and it was the only agency I worked for, for 37 years, but that I felt like it was time to retire.

Stephanie: Yeah. Is there anything that you miss about it?

Alan: Oh, I think I miss talking and working with some of the people. There were very nice people that worked in Archives II. Some very nice people. And also some very nice people that I worked with in the regions. And I sort of miss that. Occasionally, I still have some interaction with them, if they write, or I talk to them on the telephone.

Stephanie: Well, it looks like I've kept you over a little bit in our scheduled time. Was there anything else that you wanted to add to the interview? Any words of wisdom or stories that you remember?

Alan: No. I think we covered it pretty well. I can't think of anything. Maybe when I look at the transcript, there'll be other things that might occur to me as I think about it, and I read through it. No, I think you covered it pretty well, and [I'm] not the only person you talked to. So, I'm sure that other parts of the process and the whole activities have been covered by some other folks. And that link [<https://www.archives.gov/about/history/nprc-oral-histories>] will have their contribution on it too.

Stephanie: Yes. Yes.

Alan: Okay. Well, then I'll read through some of those, and see if anything else occurs.

Stephanie: Okay. Yeah. So, thanks for taking this time to talk with me today. We've really covered a lot of ground, so I'm going to go ahead and end the recording.

[END RECORDING]