

U.S. NATIONAL ARCHIVES AND RECORDS ADMINISTRATION
Transcript of National Archives History Office Oral History Interview
Subject: Bryan McGraw
Interviewer: Stephanie Reynolds
June 21, 2023

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Stephanie Reynolds: All right. I went ahead and got the recording started. Today we're talking with Bryan McGraw. I just want to say thank you for participating in the National Archives Oral History Project documenting the 1973 National Personnel Records Center, or the NPRC, fire in St. Louis and its impact on the National Archives. My name is Stephanie Reynolds, and I am based out of our Denver, Colorado, office. I'm assisting the National Archives Historian, Jessie Kratz, on this project. Today is June 21, 2023. Okay. So, Bryan, would you like to just get us started here by telling us a little bit about your background, maybe your hometown and education? I know you were in the military. Kind of get us started on some of your background here.

Bryan McGraw: Sure. Good morning, Stephanie, and thank you. I was born in Ironton, Missouri, which is in southeast Missouri, but I grew up near Imperial, which is part of the metropolitan St. Louis area. I attended and graduated from Southeast Missouri State University. I have a bachelor of science degree in geography with an emphasis in history, as well as a minor in aerospace studies. I was commissioned in the Air Force through the ROTC [Reserve Officers' Training Corps] program, served on active duty about eight years, and then from there went into various roles in the private sector before ending up at NARA in 2004. Along the way, I got my master's in public administration from the University of Oklahoma. "Boomer Sooner!" I always have to say that. That's just an OU thing. I have everything but my dissertation for my PhD in public policy from St. Louis University. I had a variety of things happen that are well beyond the scope of this interview that prevented me from finishing it, but I had everything else finished. I joined NARA in 2004. I was hired to do two basic things: to build the replacement facilities and get everybody and everything moved into those facilities, and then as well to stand up the then very small, fledgling Archival Program. We had 20,000 cubic feet of accessioned Official Military Personnel Files. Those were from Marine Corps and Navy personnel that served in the World War I period, roughly up through 1939. I accomplished both of those things. Before I knew it, it was time for me to retire.

Stephanie: Wow. That's a lot in a nutshell, right?

Bryan: Yes, that's it. Thanks for playing!

Stephanie: Well, I guess that's all today, so thank you! Wow! Well, you've got a lot of education under your belt. That's amazing. That's really impressive.

Bryan: Thank you.

Stephanie: You have a minor, you said, in history. Is that what kind of led you to the National Archives or what drew you to the National Archives?

Bryan: Yeah, it was kind of a combination of two things. At the time, I was working for the Defense Finance and Accounting Service, and I was based out of Indianapolis, but my job was about 90 percent travel. So I was either at one of the big centers that DFAS operated or at the headquarters, or working out of my house here in the St. Louis area. And when you live in a suitcase long enough, it gets really old. I got to a point where all the hotel people knew me by name. I didn't have to make a reservation. It was just like, "Oh, hey, Bryan. You're back! Thanks!" Or when you walk out of the building at the end of the day, you can't remember what the rental car was this week so you have to use the key fob to find it. That kind of thing. That's when I kind of knew it was time to find something else.

The perfect job came along, and it was a combination of military history and building and project management stuff, which I had been involved in in the military as well as in the private sector. I was a developer and a contractor for a while. So, I was like, "This is a great job!" And I went through and, of course, experienced the hiring process that we all are very familiar with, which goes on for months. You think, "Oh, they forgot about me. I didn't make it." Then one day I got a phone call from the then center director, Ron Hindman, and we did an interview over the phone for a few minutes. Then they brought me in and interviewed me. I thought the interview went not too well, all in all. I just kind of left and went back to Indianapolis, where I was working at the time, and said, "Oh, that was nice." Then about two months went by, and then I got a phone call. He's like, "Okay, when can you start?"

It was a position that was really kind of scary at first because NARA had done a lot of construction and moves, but they had not done anything of the magnitude like this. When they built Archives II back in the early '90s, obviously, there was a massive construction aspect to it, but there were a lot of staff involved in that from NARA's side. It was one that they kind of gradually moved records into the building. It took many years to fill up All. So, there was nothing quite like this project that we were undertaking. I realized early on that we had to be innovative and work hard. There were largely three of us that worked on this project in St. Louis. There was

a small team in College Park working in the facilities area and within, then, the Office of Regional Records Services. But, there were probably about 10 people hardcore working on this project. It was a massive undertaking because we had to figure out what we wanted to do as far as configuration, because in St. Louis there were two large buildings: the old Civilian Personnel Records Center—and that one housed all the OPFs (Official Personnel Folders), the civil servants—and then the Military Personnel Records Center, which had all the military records. They were both national in scope, and we had about 4.6 million cubic feet of records. They were the most requested records in the nation. Historically, NPRC is about 90-some percent of the reference activity for the entire agency because of the tie to the records with benefits and entitlements. So, I had a lot of different things kind of levied on me. One was that we've got to do this quickly, and we can't have records tied up on trucks or on pallets. So you got to move fast and, oh yeah, we need to do this really fast because we're going to be making double rent payments. At one point, we had four rent payments that we were making: the two old buildings that we were moving out of and the two new ones that we ultimately ended up taking occupancy of.

So, the first building we did was in Valmeyer, Illinois, in Monroe County, across the river from St. Louis. That one was an underground facility, and it was very cost effective. It was also quite large. It was going to house about half the collection, 2.3 million cubic feet, and 11 storage bays. It had up to 100 people at one point working there. We built that in eight months because the developer was really innovative, and underground storage is much easier to build. It cost about \$30 million or so. We started moving in October of 2008 and finished in early 2010. Concurrently, we were planning for the other facility, which ended up being Archives Drive that everyone knows today. We had to work around some various sensitive political aspects with that one. So we ended up in North St. Louis County, and we ended up with an above-ground facility that was our public facing facility. So, the research room and meeting space and things like that are all in that building.

We had to move, like I said, all these records very quickly, so we took phased occupancy, which means we didn't start paying rent on the whole building. We took a certain amount of square footage and then with each month or so, we would take on more. And so at one point we were moving records out of two buildings into two other buildings as we began working through some of the logistics of it. We were able to get everything done, and we were able to achieve things that, quite frankly, I didn't think were going to be successful. I had a few sleepless nights planning for this because I had a lot of people offering to help give me ideas and suggestions, most of which were well-intended, but they were absolute lunacy. They would never work from a logistical or a safety or whatever perspective. So I had to wade through all of that at the same time, working with people in the industry, within the Archives itself.

I had several people in the Archives that had been involved in other moves with other facilities, whether it was All, Atlanta, any of the buildings in California that were constructed in the last umpteen years and so forth. And everyone said, "Can't be done. You cannot move that fast." Because we would have to move at a rate of about 6,000 cubic feet a day. Or, if you think of it another way, that's six semi truckloads of records every day. And bearing in mind, as you know, Stephanie, the logistics of our facilities are not such that they're intended to be high volume, quick turn. You typically move the boxes in and they stay there for a very, very long period of time, and then you take them out in dribs and drabs for those that are disposed of and then the others, you keep forever and you rebox them and things like that.

So, there were all these constraints on everything. Everyone was saying, "You can't move that fast. You can only move maybe 3,000 feet a day," which would be three trucks, roughly. I talked to other people in other industries at universities, at libraries, at other state archives or private archives, just anyone that stored stuff I kind of talked to. Everyone kept telling me, "Can't do it." And then one day, it was a Saturday, I was sitting at home with my young son at the time and we were watching a race on TV. I don't remember if it was NASCAR, Formula 1, or what racing series, but it was a race and we were watching it. He was asking me questions like, "How come the guys are always in a hurry in the pits?" And I told him, "Time is money. Time is the race because you have to go so many laps and the one that completes that quickest wins the race." And I said, "The pit stop is the most critical part of the race because, in there, you win or lose valuable time—seconds."

In describing some of the things to him, a light began to come on. And I said, "You know what, I'm looking at this all wrong." I'm looking at it through the lens of, "This is how we've always moved records. So how do we move records differently?" Then I went and I looked at aircraft servicing and, being an Air Force veteran, I remembered how fast we had to turn aircraft. Whether it's flying a mission or whether it's Southwest Airlines or a cargo company, they don't make money sitting on the ground. They have to turn that plane quickly. Get it fueled, get it serviced, everything, and then load it, and "get it out of Dodge." So I looked through those two lenses and came up with a process. We did a bunch of analysis at our buildings, at Page Avenue, at Winnebago, the old buildings and the new buildings that we were moving into, to figure out what's the cycle time. It was something that Frederick Taylor and all the 20th-century industrial engineers would have been very proud of. I had to measure the cycle time of elevators, and how many steps it took for this, and so forth. Then we figured out the most efficient way to do it, and that was to use carts that were narrow, that would go down the aisles, that would allow us to stack the boxes on there, similar to the streamliners that are used today in many of our facilities. But in other moves, they would do that and then they would take those out and then

they would palletize them because everyone knows that when you ship stuff on a semi truck, it has to be on pallets because if you open the back of any semi truck, it's pallets of stuff wrapped up, shrink wrapped, and so forth. And that was just a complete waste of time and money. So we designed a cart that would fit five across to fill up the width of a trailer and be snug and not have to have any additional securing. They would bump up against each other in rows all the way back. Then you would lock them in place with the rods that they use in that industry. And, boom, we could roll those right off at the new place.

When we pulled the records at the point of origin, they were tagged, marked what records, what row, and so forth so we knew exactly how to unload them. Then everything was color coded. Red meant one thing one day, blue another day, that kind of a thing. That told us what records, where they were going, so we knew exactly where to put them once they got to the new facility. And we would have multiple teams. We had to have three or four teams working concurrently in different areas within the buildings. So we were pulling a lot more records than just from one area. There were other logistical issues we had to get around, but that was kind of the genesis of it. Then we trained everybody. I told the staff as we were planning for it, I said, "I need X amount of volunteers to help me test this out before we do this. I want to make sure this works." I said, "It has to be 'Boomer proof.'" They said, "What do you mean 'Boomer proof?'" I said, "I want to get a bunch of Boomers together, us older folks, and if we can do this, then the people that are going to end up doing it—which are much younger, stronger, healthier, more vibrant physically, and...nothing against any of you, I'm in the same boat—but if we can do this at any rate, well, by golly, when we have the 18- or 19-year-old from the moving company, this won't be an issue at all." So, they played with me and they went along with it, and it actually worked quite well. But it was a tremendous undertaking because we had to move 4.6 million cubic feet across town, as far as 50 miles, in some cases, one way from one building to the other. We did it over 383 consecutive workdays working around weekends and holidays. And the staff were moved so that it didn't conflict with the day-to-day operations.

Knowing that we have a high reference activity—4,000 or 5,000 requests every day would come into NPRC—we had to have the right balance. So, we would move staff on the weekends. Basically, the way we did it was we would show up and we would have labels for them to label their stuff—color coded again. It would go from your cubicle, where you are now to this one. We mapped it out where you're going to work in the new building. So when you left on Friday, you would have labeled all your stuff in your cubicle that was going to move. Any personal items—the coffee mugs, the photographs of the kids, stuff like that—we gave you a box or boxes, whatever you needed for that stuff, and you took that on your own because we didn't want to be responsible for putting that on the big truck. Just as you brought it in on your own, you took it out on your own. Then when you went to work on Monday, instead of going to the

old building, you went to the new building and you were met there and we had teams to unload the stuff, kind of like moving into a dorm. If you had a few boxes of your own personal stuff and we had somebody take you up to your new space, get you settled in, your computer was there and working, your phone was hooked up and working, and all of your other stuff, all of your work in progress that you were working on, any reference material, all those things were there waiting for you. The way we worked it, normally, it was Friday afternoon you would start your close out on the old end, and then Monday morning, you would work to get everything reestablished. By Monday afternoon, most people were back to being productive, answering requests. We did that over seven different weekends, seven individual days, to move about 700 people. It was logistics big time in pulling all that off.

We had, I think, seven or eight semi-truckloads of office stuff. I'll just say stuff. If you were at NPRC before—I assume it's still there—you can still find some cabinets and things here and there in the building, even though it's been over ten years since we did this. Every now and then, you would still see a sticker from the move on it like, "Oh!" I twitch a little bit or something if I saw it because it would bring back this memory. It was quite an excursion. I'm glad it went as well. Because of the way we did it, we saved—I think I said to you 6 million—we actually ended up saving 9 million dollars over the estimated cost, because the moving costs were estimated to be at around 3 dollars and 20-some cents a cubic foot. We ended up doing it for around a dollar and, all things considered, equalizing it out.

A huge chunk of the work was dealing with the burned records from the fire. We had recovered 6.8 million individual records, or folks did, back in '73. Some of those were in very dire straits—heavily charred, a lot of ash, they were fused together in blocks. You really had to be careful handling them. We developed a special cart for those to give them more support, and we had a cover that we put over them and everything to keep them protected a little more, even though there was going to be some jostling, of course, just riding in the truck. We did those during the winter months, which was the most advantageous because heat and humidity is really horrible for burned records, and we didn't want to reactivate mold that may be on some of the records. So we did those over the winter months and moved 164,000, roughly, cubic feet of those fairly efficiently. It was quite an undertaking. I've rambled there. I apologize.

Stephanie: No, that's great. It sounds like you were absolutely the perfect pick for that position.

Bryan: Well, I don't know about that. There were times I wondered. I did have a couple of instances leading up to it where I had kind of a “Lucy and the Chocolate Factory”—from the old Lucille Ball show—dreams of the chocolates coming out faster than her and Ethel can get it boxed up. I had weird dreams like that and I'd wake up in a sweat, and then I would laugh

because it was absurd, of course. But, there were times going into it that I was wondering what I had done. Would this be the end for me? But I'm glad it worked out.

Stephanie: Yeah, I mean, it just sounds like with your educational background and then your experience with the military and other private sector areas, you had the best background going in.

Bryan: Yeah. And I have to say that when we finished everything in late 2012—again, we were still building the archive and accessioning material and everything—so when it became, "Oh, you're just doing the archive stuff," individually for me, it was kind of a let down a little bit. Not that I didn't love my job. I loved history. I loved taking care of veterans and helping genealogists and everything. But having that higher ops [operations] tempo always there from 2004 through 2012, I got used to it for a while, and I realized that I'm the type of person that really thrives in that environment. That's why, I guess, the military was enjoyable for me as well, because I worked in combat support and I ended up oftentimes helping folks to build up air bases in remote locations, whether it was for drug interdiction missions or UN [United Nations] peacekeeping-type stuff. There was always that need to build up something, to do that work. You have long hours. You have lots of tasks to do, and you have to be creative in it. This job really called those kinds of skills out. Once we finished with it, I was like, "Huh, okay, now I'm just going to be the archive guy." When you look at the scope of St. Louis—because it's now the second largest archive in the system and only College Park has more textual records—and the reference activity is insane, of course, it was very busy, and that's when I got to use more of my history experiences and knowledge. I learned a lot, too, from a lot of great people over the years working with them. It was a lot of fun.

Stephanie: When you started in 2004, what did those original buildings look like?

Bryan: The original building was at 9700 Page Avenue, and it was built in 1956 at a cost of \$12.5 million. It was largely just to store records. There was no expectation at that point that the records would ever be archived, and would be permanent. It was actually built by the Defense Department, because it was built through the Army Corps of Engineers. There's some old photographs out there of the construction and everything.

Largely the building was six floors, and it was a combination of office space and records storage kind of co-mingled, if you can imagine. The original structure was kind of that period. It's what I call the old classic, elementary-school-type construction where you had cinder block walls and you had those big ugly windows that were the full length, typically, or a huge section of the wall and then they have the little casement part that opened. There were very few walls inside. I

mean, there were rooms here and there, but nothing like we have today. There was no air conditioning either, because you didn't do that in the '50s. But you had desks and work areas, and then you could literally get up and just walk a few steps and you would be, boom, with the records. They were in cabinets. They were on shelves and things.

When the fire occurred, it was catastrophic because there were no fire breaks. There were no—what we would call—fire barriers today, no fire doors, or anything of the sorts. And being a hot, humid, muggy, nasty, typical St. Louis night in July of '73, the windows were open. You didn't shut the windows, because it was hot. If you closed them up, with all the masonry, it was like an oven. So they would leave the windows open. Once the fire started, the wind took over, and you can imagine from there. It just absolutely destroyed the sixth floor. It was only through the miracles of the creativity of the firefighting community that they were able to save the building. The good news was the floors were concrete, and so the access points for the fire to jump would have been through the corridors, through the stairwells, and the elevator shafts, and they were able to contain those and keep them. But, I mean, it burned for many, many days before it was under control. It was a horrible building. It was never intended to be an archive. So when I come on board and they say, "We're going to replace it," I was like, "Yeah, this is nasty." The building always smelled of smoke from the fire. Even though it had been cleaned up decades before and repainted many times, there still was that inherent smoky smell to it. We had to move out of that into a very nice modern facility with all the basic amenities, as well as all the critical safety and preservation features built in.

Stephanie: Okay. For your everyday duty, then...what did your everyday look like? So, this is back when you were the Assistant Director of Archival Programs, correct?

Bryan: Right. Yeah, that was from the beginning of '04 through—I can't remember the year—I think around 2012 or so, after the transformation was completed. My typical day back in that period was largely focused heavily on the construction and the moves. We were doing all sorts of analysis and planning. I spent my days in meetings, on phone calls, and webinars a lot. But, as well, out and about. Once we actually started construction and the movement of records, I was kind of living out of my vehicle in some ways, and I ended up most days going to all four locations. Winnebago was in downtown St. Louis, not far from the Anheuser-Busch brewery and the riverfront. The Valmeyer facility was southeast of there in Monroe County, about 20 miles or so from Winnebago. The Page Avenue facility was kind of northwest St. Louis County. Then, of course, the new Archives Drive was in North County. So it was quite a drive to get from—for example, from Archives Drive to Valmeyer is 51 miles, I think, if I remember right, one way. I was driving a lot, and I usually ended up driving my personal vehicle because—while I could have used a government vehicle—I live in Imperial, which is south, and so I would have to drive up

Page, my main building, and then get a vehicle, and then I may have to go to Winnebago. I could have spent 18 hours in a day, but—because it just didn't make sense to waste time—I would just take my own vehicle, and I'd go to Winnebago because that was the first stop usually. Or maybe I would go over to Valmeyer. So every day was different. At the same time, I'm still hiring people because when I joined, there were five of us in the Archival Program: myself; and then I had Bill Seibert, who was the Chief of Archival Operations; and then a couple of archivists; and a secretary. We had to grow that as we were growing the operation. So I'm doing that stuff concurrently, doing archival stuff, participating in archival meetings with then-Regional Records Services, and so forth, and then we would be recruiting. And so eventually, it got to a point where we were over 40 people in size. It was a long, long period—long days.

Stephanie: Yeah, I mean, that's a significant increase in staff from, you said, five to about 40.

Bryan: Yeah. We went from 20,000 feet to just under a million. It was a lot of growth. I mean, we had records that were largely in place already, and they just became archived. With each passing day, more records would become eligible. But we also had some collections that NARA said, "We're going to centralize these because St. Louis is really a personal data archive." It's not just the military and civilian personnel records. We have a big chunk of Selective Service records, court marshals, the VA [Department of Veterans Affairs] deceased claim folders. There's a variety of things, and about 900 roughly different record series of personal data stuff. It's really convenient for the researcher, because it's one-stop shopping for those folks coming in wanting something on this person or that person. That would be very helpful. We also had some unit records, nothing like All has, but we had the morning reports, and we had a lot of material that was transferred to St. Louis after the fire because it helped to be able to prove eligibility for benefits. So it showed that this person did serve in the military. We had pay vouchers and muster rolls, things of that nature, to help show that someone actually served because their personnel record was gone.

Stephanie: When you were hiring these staff, did they have to have certain skills in terms of being able to work with records that had been burned? It's not just maybe an archival profession. You're also doing something very specific working with those records.

Bryan: Yeah, it was a combination of things, Stephanie. For some positions, we wanted to have certain skill sets. We needed that, whether it was archive management. We would hire someone who doesn't necessarily have a background in military history, but we wanted them to have an appreciation of history. You could learn the records over time. So we did things through the Archival Development Program for a few years, where we brought folks in off the street that

wanted to be archivists. We hired from time to time different management analysts to help us with the administration of programs.

St. Louis always has had the ability to be self-supporting and not have to rely on another area for expertise. So I always had a team of management analysts so we could do the budgeting stuff and supplies and procurement, and all those kinds of things because there was such a demand in St. Louis for those things. Historically, College Park was always supportive of that because that took less burden from them because they were supporting the rest of the agency. So, it really was a combination of things.

Obviously, as time evolved, we began hiring people that were more tech savvy. We needed folks that were wanting and willing to learn digital work to scan records, because a lot of the stuff we were doing in the last several years was tailored to scanning on-demand. We were the first in the agency to deliver our product exclusively in a digital format. So you would request a record, and we would scan it and send it to you digitally through Onehub. You would go through Pay.gov, and pay your archival fees. Once we had everything, we would digitize it and send you the electrons.

As part of the NARA Transformation around 2010, the Archival Program in St. Louis separated organizationally from NPRC. The archives was a different operation. We report to Research Services, whereas NPRC proper is part of Agency Services. But we were the first within the archive area to offer digital delivery. As well, when you looked at NPRC, they would produce copies. That was the model. The reference model, historically, was: you request it, we pull it, we photocopy it, we do the redactions, we make a copy of the redaction, and then we send you that product. It was like a million pieces of paper a week that went out of that building, when you consider that they were producing somewhere between 20,000 to 25,000 responses each week. A typical military record is, I think, 76 pages just across the board on average. So there's a lot of material there that has to be provided to people. A lot of times folks would just want a separation document, which was the Holy Grail document to help you get benefits and entitlements. But when you get into the archival side, they want everything because they're interested in the history. They're interested in the whole experience. So our stuff was much more involved from a standpoint of the reference activity.

Stephanie: Okay. During that time then, it sounds like maybe from 2004 to about 2012, when you were in that position as the Assistant Director of Archival Programs, what do you think was your most challenging activity or role between the construction of those two buildings, the moving of the records, and increasing staffing? Anything come to mind?

Bryan: I guess the biggest thing would be just the balancing of those competing priorities—because you had to balance things. There were times when I was earning a lot of credit time during that period. I'll say that, you know. And then you rapidly get to a point where you can't earn any more credit time. You can only earn and carry over 24 hours. So, “Thanks for playing,” you know. But that was probably the biggest thing—was just the balancing of the priorities. I remember one day I was dirty from being at the construction site and—in my car, I carried my suit with me—I got to the building and I changed clothes, did a quick refresh in the restroom and did an interview, then got done, did the change and went back out to the next building...because you don't wear a suit in those locations.

Stephanie: Right. Well, from just hearing your description, it sounds like each of those things could be a single job in itself and you were trying to do all of them at once. I can see the balancing act being difficult.

Bryan: Yeah, and I want to be clear, too. I had some great people working for me, because there were a lot of people tending the store as I was out doing different things with the moves or with the construction and that. They always had my back. And then I had theirs when it was needed. It was a lot. But that's one of the reasons why it was important for us to have the staff we needed so that we could continue to do the things. I relied heavily on Bill Seibert at the time as the Chief of Archival Ops to kind of keep the archival operation running as needed. When I needed to intervene or something, I was there. It was a team effort.

Stephanie: Okay. Having the right amount of staff with the right skills is extremely important—kind of lessons learned, in a way.

Bryan: Yes, definitely. Definitely. And thank goodness back in those days, the Human Resources Office was in the same building. They were based in St. Louis, and we could hire people very quickly, typically—nothing like what has been happening in the last 10 years or so. I'm not slamming NARA. That's kind of government wide. It's just an atrocious hiring process because you lose so many good people, potential candidates, because we can't get things done fast enough.

Stephanie: Right. Yeah. It's unfortunate how the government works.

Bryan: Yeah.

Stephanie: We're used to it.

Bryan: Definitely.

Stephanie: Can you talk a little bit about your position as the Access Coordinator for St. Louis and, I think, also a few other locations?

Bryan: Sure. After the transformation occurred and the big reorganization of NARA, my position went from being part of NPRC to falling under Research Services, the new business line in the Archives. They came up with new titles, and we were called Access Coordinators. I don't know of anyone that ever admitted to saying, "I love that title," or "I made that suggestion." It was always like, "What is this?" Basically, the way it was defined was we were there to coordinate access for all of our customers, whether it was the public or other agencies. That was the intention behind it. But, from the standpoint of the St. Louis operations, it remained basically the same in that I was responsible for overseeing all the archival growth, development, production, reference, support, preservation—all those different things. We worked closely with preservation programs to make sure that they provided us with advice, recommendations, and support here and there to take care of the records.

Since the position was more than just St. Louis—the position was more national in scope, even though it was just St. Louis—the access coordinator was part of the management team of Research Services. I suddenly had direct access to my executive, and reported to the executive. I was one of several access coordinators. We tended to be more geographically situated: West had the West Coast installations; East had the East Coast; of course, DC and College Park; and then one in the Midwest. Over time—as things change, people retire—two of the access coordinators retired, and we were at a point where, with the budget, we could not replenish those positions. So we realigned. I became the access coordinator for St. Louis and the Midwest. I took on Chicago, Denver, Fort Worth, and Kansas City in addition to St. Louis. Michael Moore—he was the access coordinator for the East—took the West. So he was on a plane a lot going back and forth, working with the various archives. That was something that was interesting. I got to work with some great people. At that point, I think I had about 80 or so staff in St. Louis and in those other locations, and we had well over two million cubic feet collectively of accessioned holdings. There were a lot of meetings. That's kind of how it was done. I was kind of centrally located. Other than Denver or Fort Worth, I could jump in the government car and could go over to Kansas City or drive up to Chicago to see folks there, or to do something. That was convenient. But it was a lot of coordination, a lot of interaction with folks, which was good. I enjoyed that, and I got to see and learn some new operations. It was challenging, but it was fun.

Stephanie: Was this on top of your regular duties or this was the full-time position, the access coordinator?

Bryan: Both of them were full-time positions and then they morphed them together and said, "Oh, you guys can do it." We just had to make it work. I guess if you were to go talk to Lori Cox-Paul or some of the other folks... Doug Bicknese up in Chicago—I hope I did a great job supporting them. That was the feedback I got. But at the same time, there's only so many hours in a day. My management style was always one of 'let people do their work and I'm there to help provide the guidance, the leadership, the intervention, the support.' I would fall on my sword for them if I knew what was right and was the proper thing to do. I just didn't want to get in their way, because I cannot stand micromanagement. That is one of the worst aspects of leadership, unfortunately. I tried to really stay out of their way but, at the same time, make sure they got the support and assistance that they needed, the resources and things like that. But it was tough, because we were going through financial issues at the time with various lack of funding and hiring restrictions. Then, boom, COVID comes along.

I stayed in that position until about '20—well I forget the exact date—but then I became the Director of the Personnel Records Division, because Research Services did a reorganization in 2020. It was around 2020 that I took on that new role, and I reverted back to St. Louis—again, national in scope because the records were national. Then we developed a field position, which Lori Cox-Paul was selected for. She took over all the field operations outside of DC and St. Louis. She was having to juggle all that stuff. When I became the Director of the Personnel Records Division—again, strongly focused on St. Louis—each year we accessioned more and more records. The reference demands were very high, and the pandemic posed a lot of challenges with everything.

Stephanie: How did that position, the Director of the Personnel Records Division, how was that different? Can you describe how those responsibilities were different from the Access Coordinator?

Bryan: I guess in many ways they were very similar, because I was still part of the leadership team of Research Services. I guess in some ways it became more national in scope because we had more holdings that were personnel files, you know, personal data-related. I became more active in some of the policy aspects for NARA, dealing with those types of records. I was more active with folks from Records Management. When new record collections would come along, we would make sure, "Oh, is there a personnel—?" you know, because that's a different criteria under the FOIA exemptions, the [Exemption] (b)(6) for personal data. I worked quite a bit with

general counsel, with the FOIA office, quite a bit on different matters of policy or issue and things like that.

Stephanie: Okay, so it sounds like you're working with a more diverse group of staff within NARA when you became the director of the Personnel Records Division.

Bryan: Yes. Yeah, I think that's an accurate conclusion to say.

Stephanie: Okay. Now, what do you think about the first reorganization when you became the access coordinator and then the reorganization again in 2020? Were there pros and cons to some of those actions? What did you think about those events?

Bryan: It was rather challenging. And I apologize, Stephanie, because I got a couple of notifications pop up and I didn't hear everything you asked me. Could you repeat that last part?

Stephanie: Oh, sure. I just was curious about what you thought of those reorganizations. The one when you became the access coordinator and then the second one in 2020. What were some of the pros and cons? Are there any lessons learned that you can give us?

Bryan: Sure. The transformation back in 2010 or so was, I think, very traumatic for a lot of people. One of the goals was to create more inclusion, more collaboration. But I think the way it turned out, it was actually more of a stovepipe because there were duties and responsibilities historically the archives had done that were taken away and put in a different business line. So when it came time for things that historically archivists would do, such as public programs, outreach, things of that nature, those were now in the Presidential business line. That was very traumatic for a lot of staff. It was very hard for the customer to understand the difference because they would come to you for one thing, and then they'd ask you a question and you'd say, "Well, I need to turn you over to these folks." And they're like, "Why? Why did that occur?" It really created, I think, a lot of confusion and a lot of bureaucracy. Speaking in retrospect now, I don't see the transformation as being a very successful endeavor. It put a stamp on things. I've been around for a long time, and whether it was the military or civilian agencies or corporate world—I worked for Deutsche Bank for a while, one of the largest in the world—and anytime you have a change in leadership, that person has to put their stamp on things. Mostly those things are not very effective. They're unique and you can brand it a certain way, but I don't know that we did a really good job with the first effort because it was largely perceived as very traumatic and "What came before us, those people were idiots." That's kind of how it was perceived. We had a tremendous amount of people leave the agency back in that time period that were great people. I know some of them. I worked with them in different capacities. They

worked in different agencies or in the private sector, and they just didn't have a desire to stay at NARA or they were told it was time to move on.

As far as the second one, I think it was successful because it really fixed some of the issues that we had internally within Research Services. There were pieces in the transformation that were never really defined well for Research Services. Working with Ann Cummings, the executive at the time, and Jay Bosanko, the chief operating officer, we were able to fix a lot of those inconsistencies to deliver a more unified product to our customers and have more clarity. It also brought together and helped us create a more unified approach to deliver our business model. So I thought it was pretty good in that regard. I mean, any kind of change can be painful, but I thought it was pretty successful.

Stephanie: Okay. It sounds like the first one caused a lot of confusion for both staff and some of the stakeholders, including veterans. Then the second one kind of helped fix some of the issues.

Bryan: Yeah, for Research Services. I mean, they still obviously don't have the outreach piece and that, and they've changed things and all that. But at the same time, it's something that we've learned to work with and to make do. And, Stephanie, I have another meeting at the top of the hour that I have to do.

Stephanie: Okay.

Bryan: It popped up, and I apologize, it's having to do with the '73 fire. It was something that that was the only time.

Stephanie: Okay.

Bryan: I'm open to continuing this if we need to in a separate conversation. I didn't want to cut you off or anything.

Stephanie: Sure, sure. Well, let me look to see from my notes what else I would like to cover and then I'll get back to you. How about that? And then if you want to set up another one, then we can.

Bryan: Yeah, that'd be fine. I appreciate it and I apologize. You can blame Meg Philips. I'm kidding!

Stephanie: That's quite all right.

Bryan: I'd be happy with any other questions you have or anything. Just let me know. And Wednesdays work well in the mornings because I generally have some time.

Stephanie: Okay. Okay. All right. Well, hey, I'll let you go then so you can get ready for the next meeting. But I appreciate so much that you set aside time today to talk to me about all of this. It's really interesting.

Bryan: Sure. Thanks, Stephanie. I'll look forward to hearing from you. Thanks.

Stephanie: Okay. Thank you.

Bryan: Bye, bye.

Stephanie: Bye.

[STOP RECORDING]