

U.S. NATIONAL ARCHIVES AND RECORDS ADMINISTRATION
Transcript of National Archives History Office Oral History Interview
Subject: Diana Roley
Interviewer: Alyssa Manfredi
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Alyssa Manfredi: All right. Thank you for participating in the National Archives Oral History Project documenting the 1973 National Personnel Records Center fire and its impact on the National Archives. My name is Alyssa Manfredi. Today is June 29, and I'm speaking with Diana Roley. Starting off, Diana, can you provide a little background on your career at the National Archives?

Diana Roley: I was hired as the Regional Archives coordinator. I was hired in August 1992, I think. And in that job, I was responsible for the regional archives outside the Washington, DC, Beltway. That was my role. And shortly after I started, there was a termite infestation in the Fort Worth facility. And it became clear that because so many of the regional archives were co-located within the Federal Records Centers, that preservation was going to have to coordinate work with the record center system as well, because it was a facility problem, not just a records problem, the termite infestation. And so that was how I started working with the records centers.

So my role expanded beyond just archival records into pre-archives. And that was how I became involved with St. Louis. Previously, I would never have even gone to St. Louis because the record centers weren't on my radar. But because of that, I went to St. Louis and did a site survey. It was probably a good five years into the job, but I did a site survey to see how the facility might be impacting the usability of the records in the long term. And that was when the B-files—the “recovered from the fire” records were called B-files—how they came to my attention was during that site visit.

My background is, I went to Columbia University's library and archives conservation program and got a degree in conservation and just sort of ended up more in the preservation administration track rather than going the treating physical records track through the jobs that I had and doing sort of large-scale conservation treatment. My internship and first job were at the Olmsted National Historic site, where we were working on the plans and drawings there, and I also got experience. Again, it's just sort of a coincidence that during my career I was

involved in disaster recovery, not just teaching workshops, but in disaster recovery. And so I was very familiar with recovering records damaged by water, fire, and that sort of thing.

Alyssa Manfredi: So that really helped you with the preservation that you did at the National Archives then.

Diana Roley: Correct. Correct. And responding to incidents like the termite infestation and the dealing with the B-files.

Alyssa Manfredi: Yeah. When you were talking about the termite infestation actually you said "pre-archives." Can you go into a little bit of what that is?

Diana Roley: Yeah. When records are brought into the National Archives from federal agencies, some are designated as having permanent value. But because they're in the physical custody of the National Archives and the record centers, but in the legal custody of the agencies, they still have access to them. But archivists know in advance for a fair number—now we're talking about being an archivist, which I'm not—are designated as having permanent value. And when they come in the door at the records center, they already know that they're going to be accessioned into the National Archives sometime in the future after their designation as a record that belongs to the agency. I'm not explaining this very well, but as a record that belongs to the agency as opposed to a record that belongs to the National Archives.

And one of the things that—I don't want to give myself too much credit here—the things that I helped to implement was if we know that they're going to be archival eventually, we should treat them as archival records when they come in the door so that they won't be as expensive to maintain in terms of their preservation once they become archival records. Again, the records that were damaged by the termites were in the archives, but they were in the Federal Records Center. But if they had been in the archives, it would have made sense to put them in conditions that would preserve them better so that there were records in good condition to accession into the archives when that time came. And so it was one of these again, large-scale preservation was my area. It made sense to identify the record if we knew which records in the beginning of their life cycle were going to be archival, treat them as if they were archival records so it would be less expensive in the future.

Alyssa Manfredi: Yeah. Yeah.

Diana Roley: So that's again, it's a matter of life cycle, that if a record only has ten years left in its life cycle and then it's going to be destroyed, well you don't necessarily have to worry about

what conditions you store it in, but if it's a pre-archival record that's going to be pre-archival for 40 years and then go into the archives, it makes sense to try to, in the most cost-effective way possible, but it makes sense to try to put them in good conditions so that when they cross that magical line and come into the archives that they'll be in good condition and not expensive to actually have to do conservation treatment on. But, you just re-box it and put it on the shelf in the even better climate conditions that the archives has.

Alyssa Manfredi: Mm, I see. Yeah, that's great. So moving on to more the fire aftermath questions, were you working in the Records Reconstruction Branch, as it was formerly called?

Diana Roley: No, I was actually working out of DC and as the National Preservation Program Officer, I was responsible for all the records outside the Beltway. So I was not responsible for anything in the College Park or Pennsylvania Avenue buildings. My responsibility was for physical records outside of Washington. And so I was doing preservation work with all of the facilities outside of DC. And so that meant teaching workshops. I had a preservation coordinator assigned to me from each facility. They weren't necessarily somebody who was trained in preservation; most of them were archivists either who had an interest in preservation or who were sort of detailed to that, and they were supposed to spend maybe 10 to 20 percent of their time on preservation activities, which I coordinated with them.

Again, I would send out information, obviously after something like the termite infestation we had, with an assignment for all of them to start doing integrated pest management in their facilities, just to monitor so that we could identify these problems early, before they had an opportunity to damage records. We gave them instructions on how to monitor the temperature and relative humidity in their facilities so that the climate wouldn't have an adverse impact on the physical records that were stored. But we also had a conservation treatment lab in San Francisco, in the San Bruno facility, and records that needed intervention, needed repair, warranted repair were sent to San Francisco for physical conservation treatment. That was also part of our program.

Alyssa Manfredi: So, records damaged by the termites or the burn records, would those go to San Francisco as well?

Diana Roley: They would not. And that was because that facility was specifically for regional archival records and because the military personnel records were not part of the archives system—they were part of the records center system—they would not go there. Also, the burned records, it was such a large-scale project—it didn't make sense. You wouldn't ship that volume of records across the country or halfway across the country for treatment. It made

sense to establish because of the volume to establish a preservation program on site there. And that was what we did.

Alyssa Manfredi: Got it.

Diana Roley: That's ultimately what we did.

Alyssa Manfredi: Yeah. So in your email you said that you had established the phased treatment program at the Military Personnel Records Center. Can you go into a little bit more detail on that?

Diana Roley: Yeah. Phased preservation was a standard method where you look at the needs of all the records in phases, and one of the first things you want to do is look at the whole universe and what is the lowest scale need that all of the records need, and all records, especially records created in the early to mid-20th century because of their chemical composition. They need a regulated temperature and relative humidity to have a longer useful life because it inhibits mold growth; it inhibits acid production that the paper is sort of inherently sitting in. Wood pulp paper has acid-producing components in it, and when exposed to, especially, extremes but temperature and relative humidity, that chemical reaction accelerates. And so you have sort of accelerated aging of paper and again, wood pulp paper primarily. And so the first phase that you do is you try to put it in good climate condition. The second phase would be to put it in a box that is alkaline to combat the acid as it's produced, to give the paper a longer useful life. Again, because paper has to move and flex when you're looking at it, turning the pages, going through it. The more brittle it becomes, the less useful it will be. It starts to crumble.

And so that's, again, it's a well-established theory of phased conservation or phased preservation that you address the whole and then those records that warrant it, especially in archival preservation as opposed to like art preservation or conservation, where you're dealing with low volume, high value, you may not necessarily consider phased conservation treatment because you're just going to treat an individual item, do whatever it needs.

But when you're looking at a large volume like archival records or libraries, you are going to do a phased approach so that everything gets put in the right condition, and then you address those items that warrant further treatment. Again, because the military personnel records, and that was part of the reason for doing the preservation, was at about that time it was determined that these were pre-archives, that they did have permanent value as a record. It was a whole records center's worth of pre-archives as opposed to a small portion of a records center. And I can't really come up with the number, but in a regular regional archives and records center most

of a large portion of the records are going to be destroyed after the agency use expires as opposed to that small percentage that is going to be deemed permanently valuable.

And there are archivists who can speak a lot better to this than I can as a preservation person. But at about that time in the mid-90s, it was determined that these were not just a 70-year record, these were permanent records, and therefore they met the criteria for being treated like an archival record, even though they weren't yet part of the National Archives. They were still records considered records center records. So that was the reason they didn't go to San Francisco—because they weren't part of that system. They weren't part of the regional archives system.

And then doing the phased conservation, that was how we approached the burned records—they were already in climate control. I think I mentioned in the pre-interview that I did a survey once. Once we determined that these were going to be permanent records, I identified that there was some kind of treatment going to be required because of the condition of the records. They were not in usable condition in the Records Reconstruction Branch. If they had to use B-files, it was under very limited circumstances, and in many cases the records were in such poor condition that they could not be handled by the reconstruction unit.

So I worked with Bill Seibert and did a survey of the records. It was to be statistically valid. You need to do a certain number of records, look at a certain number, and then you can extrapolate the condition of the whole series, the whole collection of records. And so that was what I did. After the fire they were put in cold or cool storage, and so I sat in those rooms and I counted off—I don't remember what the number was—but it was a statistically valid sample. I counted off units and then pulled out a file and recorded it.

I think I had like a half-page sheet that had condition descriptors, and I would just check off what that folder contained, that it was burned and all of the upper half of the text could not be read because there was low contrast between the image and the paper because the paper had become so dark, or that the pages were fused together because of pressure and moisture and mold growth. Just a whole variety of physical conditions of the paper. I recorded all of that and then analyzed it and came up with what proportion of the B-files was going to be in, what kind of condition, and then, I can't remember, I think I've determined that it was going to be something like a 50-year project with 10 technicians working and a certain amount of equipment. And it was what the technology in preservation was at the time. And I really realized that things have certainly advanced since then, the way that images can be digitally manipulated to clarify images. At that point, we were using photocopiers. If a page was so badly burned that it wouldn't flex without cracking or shattering, we would put it in a mylar sleeve

and put it on the photocopier. That was the technology that we had for making a useful copy for the reconstruction unit to use.

The only way to enhance the image was to turn the exposure up or down on the copy machine to try and enhance the image that way. So obviously when you're making a plan for preservation, you can only make it with the technology that's available at the time and the cost of that. And fortunately the National Archives only asked me for a 10-year plan even though I knew it was going to take 50 years or more. They asked me for a 10-year plan, a 10-year budget, and what materials and supplies we needed to purchase. And we hired Marta O'Neill to work locally. Again, I was not living in the area. My job was outside of the regions where I was operating. And so we hired somebody local with preservation experience who could take on the project. And so all I did at that point was I gave her a 10-year budget and plan and the resources that she would need to start the program and get it up and running.

Alyssa Manfredi: Yeah. Well, if your proposed plan was 50 years for conservation, what would that typically look like? Would just be like a period of time that a file has to be like in cold storage or what would that look like as opposed to the 10 year?

Diana Roley: No, that was the 50 years was how long it would take to address all the records, all the B-files.

Alyssa Manfredi: Oh, okay. I see. Got it.

Diana Roley: Yeah. And again, it's a matter of usability, how do you extend the useful life of a record? And so the plan was to put every B-file in a condition that it would be usable in perpetuity because they were permanent records or they were going to be permanent records at that point. I don't remember what date it was. Bill can—have you interviewed Bill? I don't know if he's around. But yeah, he would certainly know. He'll know the exact dates of when Congress decided that these were permanent records, even though, again, because I'm a preservation person and I married an archivist. And the way I described it was that preservation people make recommendations, and archivists make decisions.

Alyssa Manfredi: Cool. Very interesting to look at it like that.

Diana Roley: Because it wasn't my job to put a value, even an historical value on a record. That's the archivist's role. I can do one of 10 things. You show me a record or a series of records, I can do one of 10 things with these records or one of 20 things with these records, and each one of them has a cost associated with it in terms of personnel and material that needs to be procured.

And that sort of thing. My job was to tell you all of that, and it was up to the archivist to decide that in terms of its value to history, what warrants that level of treatment. And that's one of the beauties of phased conservation treatment is it does give you a range of options with an associated cost to be able to make it, so that you can decide yes, we need to do the bare minimum for absolutely everything. And then again it's up to the archivists to decide what records warrant what level of treatment.

I know there have been articles written about the preservation program at the National Personnel Records Center and the Military Personnel Records Center that talk about the treatment that they're doing. But obviously, you know, taking an eraser and a small vacuum to an individual piece of paper, it's labor intensive and there's a cost associated with that. And I think the determination was made, and this is done a lot, where preservation happens at the point of request so that when a record is requested for reference, that's when the preservation happens. So again, that's all part of the phased approach that everything gets a good climate, everything gets a good box. It's only records as they're requested. And again, it's a matter of cost. If a record is going to sit in the box not looked at for 500 years, well then why go to the expense of treating it? But when a record is requested and it needs to be used and it's not usable because of its physical condition, then you go put in the expense and treat the record and put it in the hands of the person who needs it, and then it's preserved forevermore.

And one other important part of phased conservation treatment is reproduction. There are some records that should never be physically handled because they're so fragile or because they're so valuable. And therefore reproduction is the best method of preservation. And that's one of the reasons why the photocopier was one of the most important tools we had. It was very inexpensive. And yeah, it might have required some labor to put a piece of paper in a sleeve, to put it on the photocopier plate, but it was the least expensive way to preserve the information.

And that's one of the distinctions that we make in archives versus art conservation or even library conservation and archives are sort of grouped together because a reproduction, the information is what's important, not necessarily the artifact. There are some artifacts that are valuable as artifacts. A DD 214, which is your separation paper—which is one of the main records that the Reconstruction Branch is looking for so that you can provide benefits to a veteran—you know, the millions and millions of DD 214s that have been created over the decades, many decades, over the centuries are not as valuable as the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution, which are the original artifacts preserved in the best condition at any expense.

Alyssa Manfredi: I see. So when you're looking at these original records, were most of these files that you looked at salvageable? Or, like the burned records or anything that you were going through or those mostly salvageable or—

Diana Roley: There was something. The reason that they were put, they were saved as B-files was there was something. Every piece of paper had a little bit of something. If the page was, like, completely blackened and brittle, and there was a tiny sliver of information in one corner that was still readable, was still accessible. When we started this program, we didn't have the digital manipulation of images that we have now where a page that I could look at in 1998 and say, I can only see four words on this whole page and the photocopier can give me an additional four words. Now they can scan that and digitally remove all of the yellow or brown or whatever, and they can read 75% of that page now. So it's not—I'm not in the field anymore, and I don't know what preservation people think the future may hold for them—but certainly in 1998, I didn't imagine that they'd be able to get that. I knew that technologies were being developed. I knew that we would be able to get more. It didn't make sense to consider anything a total loss at that point, because now, you know, it's orders of magnitude beyond what I was able to do in those days.

Alyssa Manfredi: Yeah. See, that's really impressive. Wow. 75%.

Diana Roley: Well, you know, I just pulled a number out of the air. But there's a *Prologue* article. I think there was an article that was done in *Prologue*, like 2000, before 2010, it wasn't 2003. It wasn't on an anniversary. But there is an article that was in *Prologue* that was showing—and again, it wasn't that much after—what I when I was doing it was maybe 10 years after I left NARA that they were talking about that technology and that *Prologue* article. And as I recall, it looked like a page that was half burned. And once you saw the redone digital image, it looked like a completely readable black on white piece of paper.

Alyssa Manfredi: For answering records requests like you were talking about earlier, can you kind of walk me through the process of what that involved and how you would preserve something to show a request like that?

Diana Roley: I wasn't involved at that point. Again, my role ended with getting the budget and getting the National Archives to ask Congress for the money, getting the space established, and hiring the people. So Bill and Marta would be better equipped to handle that question. I do know that in other projects that I worked on, like at Olmsted National Historic Site, we were going through the whole series of plans and drawings in an organized way. We just sort of went drawer by drawer because the firm stored the records in drawers. But we also, because they

were creating them on different media, they did linen drawings and they did, we had drawings on linen and essentially like a tissue paper, which was browned and brittle. And we had blueprints that were produced in-house by the Olmsted firm. We were doing it by medium because it was just more efficient to treat paper together. But we also were doing it not chronologically, just physically going drawer by drawer. But if a researcher came in and asked to see something, they were working on a project that would jump to the front of the line, we would do the preservation treatment on it. Sometimes we would take a look at it and say it'll take us a month to get through this, make an appointment for, you know, six weeks from now.

And we would do the treatment and make it available. The other thing that they did at Olmsted was—and again, this was back in the day when we were doing things on a copy stand, what they called it—where you would mount a 35mm camera above a flat surface with lights on the side and take pictures. And the researchers would come in with their own camera, their own equipment. But they had to; I take it back. They didn't. We would do the photographing. We would photograph it, and we would charge the client or the researcher for the print. But we also charge them for the negative. And the negative became part of the collection so that the next researcher wouldn't have to have us climb up on the ladder and take the picture again. It became part of the collection so that we wouldn't have to unroll that drawing again or photograph it again. We had a usable reproduction to provide to the next researcher, and the next, and the next.

Now, when you're talking about military personnel records, again, unless it's somebody who's using them for research like an epidemiologist who wanted to see medical records of this population of men in the United States, they would be wanting to look at all medical records of all people who joined the Army in a certain year. But for the most part, the Records Reconstruction Branch—again, this is not my area of expertise—but it's my understanding that the Records Reconstruction Branch is responding to a family or a veteran. So it's a one use in a lifetime kind of event unless a family loses track of the DD 214 or whatever record it is that they need to prove their service. If they lose it and need to come back again, but for the most part, the Military Personnel Records Center is providing one use in a lifetime of a record. Again, there are famous people who served in the military and so that has a multi-use, or historical use value, and therefore it makes the most sense to do a high-quality reproduction and retire the original and let people access the reproduction instead.

Alyssa Manfredi: Yeah, absolutely. You touched on this in some of the first questions, but how did this project on the military personnel fire differ from your experience working with the preservation and conservation of the files that got destroyed by the termites in your other job, or in your other place?

Diana Roley: Mostly in scale and condition. The termites were just a limited scale, and we ended up doing a very low-tech treatment on them. This gets complicated, but what subterranean termites do is the termites that you see are going grocery shopping. And because the termites themselves can dry out so quickly, what they do is they build mud tunnels, so they take the dirt from underground and they bring it into the building and build a tunnel around themselves while they take the paper, which is cellulose. They're eating the paper, essentially, and they take that back to the—what is it called?

Alyssa Manfredi: Their homes?

Diana Roley: Yeah, well, you know, their family. Their swarm. Their—I can't think of the word.

Alyssa Manfredi: Colony?

Diana Roley: Colony! Thank you. So they're taking the food back to the colony. But what they do is they build these mud tunnels around themselves. And so when you open up a box and it looks perfectly fine, and then you pull out a block of paper and there's this like, lacy pattern, because they don't go they don't go in a straight line highway. They just sort of meander their way through. And so what we did was we took all of the infected boxes. It was Fort Worth, the weather was nice. We built it like a tent kind of thing. A canopy. And we set up tables and we just pulled the paper out. We would peel, you know, because there's this sort of lacy pattern with dirt around it. We would peel the paper off, and when we came across it, a live termite, we would kill it.

That was the treatment methodology that we established for that because it was limited in scope. If it was thousands of boxes instead of dozens of boxes, we might have had to do something completely different. And again, this was thousands and thousands and thousands of boxes of burned records, and when they recovered the records, they didn't necessarily, you know, they were scooping them up off the ground, that was my understanding. They put a bulldozer on top of the building and just scraped the sixth floor off onto the ground. And they recovered paper from the ground. And so it was all mixed up, and it was in all different kinds of conditions. They just sort of put it in files and put it in boxes. And some of it had gone to the vacuum freeze dryer facility. And so they were all mixed up and they were in various conditions. You could have moldy records next to burned records, next to perfectly fine records. There were some records that were in very good condition. And so it was just sort of all mixed up on the shelves in the records center there. There were some series where it was just all the same kind of condition. But it really was quite a mix. And they did their best. It is remarkable that anything

was salvaged, frankly. And it's remarkable that there is valuable information in there, again, not just for the veterans and their families, but for history.

Alyssa Manfredi: Yeah, absolutely. Is there anything else that I haven't asked about that you wanted to touch on any more details in your job or your or your coworkers and their roles?

Diana Roley: I really do want to stress that it was all Bill Seibert. He was the one who brought this to my attention. He was really, really passionate about the records and the information and its value. And he advocated for me when I needed to justify being there and doing the work. He advocated for me when I needed help developing the plan and coming up with the best way to tackle it. And maybe it's part of the role of an archivist. But Bill just did it with so much passion for these records and what they represented, not not just to the veterans and their families but to posterity, that there's a preservation program there at all. It was really, really important to him. And so it became important to everybody he interacted with, including me. That was what kept me going because it was a lot of days sitting in the cold counting off and evaluating records. And I'm sure that, you know, Marta will tell you that it was a tough slog at the beginning because it can be daunting to look at that volume and wonder how you'll approach it and how you can possibly manage it in your lifetime. But, because Bill was so enthusiastic, it kind of kept me motivated. It kept me going on the project. And all I did was start it and walk away. You know, he and Marta stayed on and saw it through.

Alyssa Manfredi: That's great to hear about. That's so interesting and cool. That's all, I have no more questions to ask you, but thank you so much for participating in this oral history for the National Archives.

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