

U.S. NATIONAL ARCHIVES AND RECORDS ADMINISTRATION  
Transcript of National Archives History Office Oral History Interview  
Subject: Margaret Bruno  
Interviewer: Jen Hivick  
June 26, 2023

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**Jen Hivick:** 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 Jen Hivick. Today is June 26, 2023, and I'm speaking with Margaret Bruno. Thank you for being here today, Margaret. We really appreciate it. To start, could you provide us with a brief overview of your career at the National Archives?

**Margaret Bruno:** I started in February of '74 as a grade three clerk typist in the correspondence section. And then I did get a promotion to secretary of the Army Reference branch, worked for a while in the Building Manager's office, and ended my career after being Assistant Director's secretary to being the secretary to the Director and retired in 2016.

**Jen:** Congratulations! How did you come to work at the National Archives, and why did you choose to work there?

**Margaret:** My neighbor was the Marine Corps liaison officer there, and I was looking for a job and was working at a small little store where I lived. And in talking with him, I told him that I had worked for the government before and had almost four years. And he said, "Why don't you come to work? You have reinstatement rights. I'm going to get you an application. Call CPR and get a statement of service."

**Jen:** Did you have any impressions of the agency at the time you began your career? Did you know anything about them?

**Margaret:** I knew nothing about it. I saw that a record center had burned on the fire in July of '73, but I had no idea what records they were referring to.

**Jen:** Okay. So when you started, did they give you any particular kind of training?

**Margaret:** Oh, yes. Training was short. It was mostly typing from drafts that the archives techs prepared in response to requests. But working with them taught me more than I could ever have learned otherwise.

**Jen:** Okay. Very in-hand sort of learning. Yeah. Awesome. What aspects of the work did you enjoy? Was there anything in particular that stood out?

**Margaret:** I favored being either a typist or secretarial type, but I did work cases for about a year and a half, and then I was offered a reassignment to a secretarial position, so I took that.

**Jen:** What was your work like in the secretarial position?

**Margaret:** Well, a lot of it had to do with disciplinary actions. And at that time on, you know, electric typewriters, we had the original and five carbon copies. It also involved typing responses to requests that the Branch Chief handled. Also keeping time cards and just general clerical duties.

**Jen:** Okay, so what made you want to move to the secretarial position? Was it just that you liked the work more? Did they offer different hours?

**Margaret:** I just enjoyed answering the phone, interacting with people, that type of thing. You know, having visitors come or setting up a meeting rather than just typing from drafts.

**Jen:** Okay, that makes sense. Do you recall any particularly unusual, challenging, or anything that sticks out in your mind regarding your job in its entirety from the beginning to the end?

**Margaret:** No, not really.

**Jen:** Okay. Do you know if changes in Presidential administrations or changes for the Archivists of the U.S. administrations, did that change the nature of your work at all, or was it pretty consistent regardless of who was President?

**Margaret:** My work was pretty consistent.

**Jen:** Okay, that's what we're getting from a lot of people.

**Margaret:** Well, you know, veterans write in that they need this, this, this or that from the record, and we provided it hopefully.

**Jen:** What would you say were the most significant turning points in your career?

**Margaret:** I guess when I was selected to be the secretary to the Assistant Director. And then when the Director's secretary retired, I applied to be the Director's secretary. Okay.

**Jen:** What was that selection process like?

**Margaret:** For the Assistant Director. I think back then, I can't remember what year I was selected for that position. It was like a written resume or he was aware of the work that all the applicants did because we were all in the center. For the Director's secretary position, it was done online.

**Jen:** Okay, did you have any relationship with the other federal agencies like the Army, the VA, Air Force, any of those?

**Margaret:** I began working for the government at the Aeronautical Chart and Information Center. It became Defense Mapping, and it now has another name, National Geospatial something or other.

**Jen:** What do you think was your greatest accomplishment while working at NARA?

**Margaret:** Well, becoming the secretary to the Director brought me to a grade level I'd never thought I would achieve and felt very proud of myself for accomplishing that.

**Jen:** As you should. That's a very competitive position.

**Margaret:** Yeah, it is.

**Jen:** Okay. What kind of technological advancements have you observed throughout your career there?

**Margaret:** Well, starting with doing everything with pencil and paper to getting computers, learning how to do time and attendance on computers, searching for records on computers, or requesting records on computers, everything. It just was a whole new thing because everything in the beginning was paper and pencil.

**Jen:** And carbon copies.

**Margaret:** Yes, carbon copies.

**Jen:** Do you recall your last day at the National Archives? What did that feel like?

**Margaret:** My work day or my retirement day?

**Jen:** I was thinking work day, but we can go with retirement day.

**Margaret:** Retirement day was amazing because I don't think I even went up to my office until after the party and finished cleaning out. But it was quite humbling. There were a lot of people there. My family was there, but the highlight was when Jay Trainer put on a St. Louis Cardinals hat for me. That was just shocking. Jay was a good guy. But for him to do that, I think it caused him a little bit of pain.

**Jen:** Not a fan of the Cards?

**Margaret:** Oh, I can't remember who he likes. Cincinnati Reds. It was not his team. It was not his team.

**Jen:** That was a sacrifice then.

**Margaret:** Yes, definitely.

**Jen:** How do you view your time in the National Archives?

**Margaret:** What do you mean?

**Jen:** So, looking back on it, are you like, do you kind of miss it? Are you proud of it? Are you like, "I am retired now? I'm done with it all."

**Margaret:** I am retired now. I don't miss it. I do think of some of the people I worked with. It was a very good work experience. It was a good, good place to work with a lot of nice, very smart people. And there was a lot of history, and I learned a lot of things working there well.

**Jen:** So what message or advice would you give to someone just starting at the National Archives?

**Margaret:** Do your best. Work hard. I mean, today you have a much better chance of advancing and making a fairly good salary than we did back when.

**Jen:** Is there anything else you would like to add to the section of the interview that is obviously career specific? Anything else in your career you'd like to mention?

**Margaret:** No, not really. I think most of it was very good, you know, I mean, there were a few things I didn't care for from time to time, but that goes with anything. If I'm going to shout out to somebody, it would be to the mailroom people. They were always there to help. They were great. They were great.

**Jen:** Awesome. So now, because the oral histories are in part looking at the 1973 anniversary of the fire, I'm going to move on to questions that are a little more specific about the fire and its

aftermath. Okay. I know that you didn't start until 1974, but I'm sure that there was a lot still going on with the fire. Well, first of all, do you remember anything about hearing about the fire before you started when it was happening?

**Margaret:** I saw it on TV. It was on the news that the record center was on fire. I had no idea what records they were referring to. I had never heard of the record center.

**Jen:** Okay. So I bet it was a big shock to come there '74 and realize just how much that affected things. What was it like starting at the National Archives right after the fire? What kind of impact did you see on how people did their job day to day? How did it affect everyone?

**Margaret:** Well, I was a little bit nervous about starting. I hadn't worked in about 12 years. People seemed to be pretty conscientious about doing their job. The offices were in a huge room. Everybody was together and the supervisors were able to see if you were not doing your job or kind of goofing off, they could see and fix that right away. But it was a good place. And it seemed like people were there to do their work, do their job.

**Jen:** Okay. At that point in time, did you interact with the burnt records at all? Did you see the burnt records in any capacity?

**Margaret:** Actually, I saw records opened up on the window sills in the offices with the windows open, trying to dry them out. And we have come such a long way from that. But upon entering the building, you could smell the dampness and then you could see maybe water stains or wet stains on the wall still. And then you would maybe see a little puddle here and there. But for the records when I worked cases, that was an eye opener because I worked in the Records Reconstruction Branch, where we did get all the burnt records.

**Jen:** So during your job in the Records Reconstruction Branch, what were your responsibilities there at the time?

**Margaret:** Basically, I was a secretary to the Branch Chief, but I had been an archives tech and worked cases, the position right before that. And so I knew how to work cases. I worked in the Air Force Reference Branch.

**Jen:** Okay. When the fire occurred, it was largely on the sixth floor. So it affected the records on the fifth and the sixth floors. Where were the records being stored at this time? Immediately after, when you started work, do you remember?

**Margaret:** The records that were not involved?

**Jen:** So the records that had been burned but were still salvageable.

**Margaret:** Oh, I really don't know. I don't know. I'm not aware that they were able to salvage any of them on the sixth floor. But I could be wrong about that. I don't know.

**Jen:** Okay. Where was your office? What floor was it on?

**Margaret:** Mostly on the second floor.

**Jen:** Okay.

**Margaret:** Recon [Reconstruction Branch] was started on the ground floor at the east end of the building. And then we came up to the second floor.

**Jen:** Okay, What did Recon do at the time?

**Margaret:** Well, mostly they worked with the burnt records or fire-related records, I should say. And they had different sources they could go to to help verify service if it wasn't contained in the record or if they couldn't actually get through the record. They had an organizational records section which searched organizational records, and we had our own search section, which had service number index, pay vouchers, and documents like that that you could go to verify certain parts of a person's military service.

**Jen:** Okay. Yeah. We still occasionally have stuff like that. We still go to that. Do you recall how many records requests were coming in per week at the time?

**Margaret:** I could be wrong here, but I think when the backlog would reach 100,000, the center Director would go, no way. So yeah, I don't know how many were coming in, but I know when the backlog hit, if it came near 100,000, that was not acceptable.

**Jen:** Okay, so at the very beginning when you did actually work as an archives technician, how many of the requests for records would you estimate were for ones that were burnt versus ones that were not damaged.

**Margaret:** Well, when I worked in the Archives as an archives tech, I worked in the Air Force Reference Branch, so I did not have burnt records to deal with.

**Jen:** You got to avoid those ones. So did you ever have to deal with the original burnt records at any point in time? Did you have to physically handle them?

**Margaret:** Yes.

**Jen:** Okay. What did they look like?

**Margaret:** Well, they varied from just being singed around the edges to opening a record and finding half of the document was burnt, and sometimes because they had had water damage, when you tried to separate the pages, they would crinkle and crack. So you really couldn't get into the record at all.

**Jen:** So when you were handling them, did you have to wear anything like masks or gloves at the time.

**Margaret:** No.

**Jen:** None of that was needed at the time?

**Margaret:** No.

**Jen:** Okay. Did they smell like smoke?

**Margaret:** They had a certain smell. I don't think it was smoke. It was more like wet paper, damp, you know. And sometimes when you'd open it up, you'd kind of start itching because maybe there were like little paper mites or something in them.

**Jen:** Were they moldy?

**Margaret:** No.

**Jen:** Okay. In the years immediately after the fire. So let's say '74, '75, '76, how much did people commemorate the anniversary? Did they pause and remember and think about the fire every July 12th? Or was it just kind of going about your business?

**Margaret:** Yeah, it was. I mean, we knew the date, but no, nothing specific was remembered or celebrated or whatever.

**Jen:** Okay. Yeah. Did your work change the way that you view records or the importance of records?

**Margaret:** Absolutely. Well, not knowing that the records even existed or not ever having thought about it since I didn't know what records were there on Page. Yes, for sure it did.

**Jen:** Yes, okay. Is there anything else that you'd like to add?

**Margaret:** We sure have come a long way from when I started, because everything was done manually. You know, searching, requesting, opening. Everything was done manually, so.

**Jen:** Yeah, there's a big difference there. Oh, yeah. Okay, great. Well, thank you so much for this. I appreciate it immensely. I'm going to go ahead and pause it.

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