

U.S. NATIONAL ARCHIVES AND RECORDS ADMINISTRATION
Transcript of National Archives History Office Oral History Interview
Subject: Michael and Cindy Pierce
Interviewer: Stephanie Reynolds
May 17, 2023

[BEGIN RECORDING]

Stephanie Reynolds: All right. Okay. Let's go ahead and get started. First, I just want to thank you both for participating in this National Archives Oral History project. We are trying to document the 1973 National Personnel Records Center (or NPRC) fire that occurred in the St. Louis area and the impact that the fire had on the National Archives. My name is Stephanie Reynolds. I'm based out of the Denver, Colorado, National Archives office, and I'm assisting the National Archives Historian, Jessie Kratz, on this oral history project. And Jessie is also on the call today. Jessie, did you want to say hi?

Jessie Kratz: Yes, hi. And thanks, Mike and Cindy, for doing this really important oral history for us.

Michael Pierce: Glad to be here.

Cindy Pierce: You're welcome. We're glad to do it.

Stephanie: Okay. Today is Wednesday, May 17, 2023. And I'm speaking here today with Michael and Cindy Pierce. Would one of you like to go ahead and start and just maybe tell us a little bit about your background, maybe where you're from, your hometown, your education, how you came to start at the National Archives?

Michael: Go ahead, Cindy.

Cindy: All right. I'll go first. I'm Cindy Pierce. I've been at the National Archives here in St. Louis for just over 20 years now. I started as an intern. I went to school at Southeast Missouri State University and got my bachelor's there in Historic Preservation. And I had to have an internship to graduate. And I luckily had someone who came from the Kansas City office to present to one of my archives classes, and he got me in touch with Marta O'Neill, who just retired about a year ago, but was working in the Preservation Lab in St. Louis, and she was willing to take me on as an intern. And I started as a student hire. I was actually paid, which was wonderful at the time. That was one of my big requirements. But I started then, and I never left. I really enjoyed the

work, and I got to start off working with records that were affected by the fire right off the bat with a project as an intern. And so I've been involved with working with these records for the last 20 years. I'm originally from Lodi, California, and I came out here to go to school.

Michael: I'm Michael Pierce. I was born here in St. Louis, in the Carondelet neighborhood of South St. Louis. I've always had a strong love of history and genealogy. And I was one of those late bloomers. I went back to school around 1998 and got my bachelor's in American Studies from Webster University here in St. Louis. Once I finished that, I started looking for a job. There were two places in St. Louis that I really would have liked to have worked, and NPRC was one of them. And I found out about the opening there in the Preservation Lab on the last day that it was posted. And I was working at a company just down the street. So I took all my application materials into NPRC that day. And a couple of months later I heard from them, got the interview, got the job. And I was there from 2002 until 2018, when I had to stop working due to disability.

I always loved what I did. Still do. Still consider it a major highlight of my life because I was working to help people. You know, all those documents that we worked on, behind each one of them was a person. And that was my big thing as far as working there.

Stephanie: Wonderful. Thank you for that. Did either of you receive training from the National Archives when you were working there or currently working there?

Cindy: Yeah, it's really an on-the-job training kind of situation we have, because there's very few places in the world really that work with fire-damaged records in the way that we do. And even though I had a background in historic preservation and working with documents that I got in school, I had a little bit of a hands-on cleaning experience. You really learn how to handle the burn documents on the job, and training on the job is a really specific part of what we do and establishing and developing different practices that are good for handling burned records and the effects that the records, the damage the records have from the fire, come in different forms. So dealing with the distortion, the mold and the soot and ash all take different skill sets.

Michael: Yeah, my undergrad and my graduate degrees were both in American Studies. It involves a lot of research. So I have known for 50 years or longer now the importance of documents doing this kind of thing. And yeah, like Cindy said, our training at NPRC was definitely on the job. The people that worked or that still work in that lab were the experts in the field. When it comes to treating fire-damaged records, people have the same sort of situation. They would come to us for information and advice.

Stephanie: Okay. Maybe let's start with you, Cindy, and we'll kind of go from you to Michael since we started this way. Can you tell us maybe what a typical day looks like in the Preservation Department?

Cindy: Well, over the years, we've kind of developed a way of handling things. And we found that because of the work we do with mold, we split our day up into four-hour shifts. We don't want to have exposure to the mold and soot for longer than that. And it's tedious, and it's detailed work. And so changing your task halfway through the day helps your mind to not go completely numb. And we found that it's just more enjoyable and we can still get the same amount done. So we do four hours of one task and then four hours of another task, and half of that time is usually spent working directly with burned, damaged documents. The other half is working on the digital part of restoration that we do in our lab.

Over the last 20 years, we've kind of gone from being very hands-on to being a lot more computer-oriented in our approach to providing access to these records. And that's something that, you know, has evolved over time, especially during the pandemic. We made a lot of changes to our processes because we were forced to. But it's also become a really good thing. What they say about necessity promotes change and is the catalyst to making things better sometimes. And we really found that some of the changes we made, because we had to, were really good in making us better and faster at servicing our veterans.

So we do a lot of re-scanning of old microfilm that provides access to the information that was lost during the fire. That's part of what we do, as well as the physical handling of the burn documents themselves. And so I might spend four hours cleaning and scanning "B-file" documents—that's all the records from the fire. And then I'll spend four hours working on the computer scanning clean documents, but documents that are supplemental to the information that was lost—because that's a big part of what the record center does is provide the information or else find the information elsewhere that would have been in those burned files.

Stephanie: What do the burned records look like, that you're working with?

Cindy: A lot of them have a portion that's usually stable. It's usually the outside edges. If you think about a record sitting in a file like this, the bottom will usually be okay. And then the top and maybe the sides will be burned in like an arc. It depends on where the record was in the box. It can have ash, mold, soot. Usually you don't have mold on the same page that you have really a lot of burned, blackened material because I'm assuming, this is just me, because I don't have fire forensic experience, I'm assuming the conditions that caused the fire dried the records out to the point that they didn't have mold that grew in that same area. They put so much

water on that building for so many days. It was weeks that they sprayed water into the building. It was literally running out the dock bays at the bottom. We have pictures of people with squeegees pushing the water out off the floors. There was mold damage on all six floors, and so a large portion of what we do is to remove the mold from records and then to flatten and humidify records so that they're flat and they can go into a flat file. We did a lot of that before the pandemic, and now we do a little bit less of that. We just take a quick scan and flatten it with a piece of plexi to get a good scan, if we can, and then move on to the next one. But we've developed several different procedures over the years that work really well for flattening records that were left distorted.

We have some really good images on our website, and I think we have one record we call the football. It was literally a wadded pile. And we showed the steps of how you take each piece apart, and we have a dome that we use to humidify in with a little humidifier, kind of like the one you use in your house, which has a tube that goes into it and it kind of looks like a large incubator that you might see in a NICU unit [neonatal intensive care unit]. And we lay the sheets out, and they are flattened in about 15 minutes. There's enough moisture in there that it relaxes the paper fibers. We then stack the paper in between layers of blotter and put it in a book press overnight. And as the papers dry, they then relax and they're flat, and you would never know it had been distorted before. It's amazing and it's really effective. It just takes a lot of time. So we do that on things that are really, really badly distorted and it's amazing. It's fun to look at the before and afters, and there are great images—and we can give you some of those if you'd like to use them. But it's time consuming. And so we have to kind of balance access and speed, you know, and what we can do to help the record and what we're doing to help the most veterans. And it's always kind of a challenge that we have in our department is how to do the most with the least amount of time and effort so that we can do more for more people, if that makes sense.

Stephanie: Are you doing this for all of the records or just as they're being requested?

Cindy: That's a really good question, and we've always done it as requested. There's just too much. We continually have at least a month's worth of a backlog, sometimes a little bit more, sometimes a little bit less. At times, it was a couple of years when we were working on more detailed—trying to do more detailed stuff to more records. So we have enough just doing the requested records and we're trying really hard to keep up with what's being requested. And we're down to about a month, a month-and-a-half backlog.

We also are doing just the records that are requested from people outside of NPRC. So the VA [U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs], those law enforcement agencies that need information,

any other government agency that needs the information, we will treat the record as needed or scan it and send them a copy.

The records that are worked within the record center itself are just pulled and worked by the technicians and returned to file. We do triage them to make sure that they're safe to handle. And there's a small team that works with really badly damaged stuff that can't be handled by a regular correspondence technician. And we've done that all along, and that allows them to be able to continue to work their processes and eventually we'll probably handle most of the records because they'll be requested either by the research room or by somebody from the outside that needs it for something—a researcher. We do try and treat the stuff for the research room or have that provided in a copy format if it's too damaged.

Stephanie: Okay. That's a lot of information there. We're going to circle back to you. This is great! This is what we're looking for. So I want to go back to Michael now and see what a typical day like was for him. And then we can talk about some of those themes that you brought up. Okay?

Michael: The typical day was really as Cindy described it. There's not a whole lot I could add to that. There are so many myths and misconceptions about that 1973 fire. I would get questions—“How badly are they burned?” Some of them had very little burn on them at all. Some of the paper would be about as pristine as you could expect and might have a little bit of mold, a little bit of soot, a little bit of ash on it, and you clean that off. And it was ready to forward on.

And then there were others, like what Cindy described as the football. I would sometimes describe it to people as paper kimchi, if you can imagine. Take a bundle of paper, set them on fire, throw in—not just with that ash and that soot—but throw some in from your barbecue grill, wet it down real good, wad it all up, and bury it in the ground for three days and then take it out and do the best that you can, trying to straighten that paper out and clean it.

We really accomplished a lot as far as documents like that, because you would sometimes receive these things and you're just going, oh my gosh, especially when I first started there. This isn't going to end well. And then you look at the end product after you went through all the processes to clean it up, straighten it out, get it ready for photocopying. And I would just think, wow. You know, it's amazing. You can make out the words on this. And then when we started using the process several years ago where you could take a sheet of paper that was essentially burned black. You couldn't read anything on it, but you could use a process where you take a picture of that, run it through software—and ink and pencil lead work at different temperatures in a fire than what paper does. You can run that through a process. And in the end you're

looking at a recreation of a perfect document. You can read everything that's on it. After it's gone through the software you can look at this on your computer. Some of the technological stuff, I don't understand how it works, but it just always amazes me. And so still for me, it was the realization that there were people behind these documents. There were veterans or their family members that were waiting to get home loan benefits, health care benefits, end-of-life health care benefits, being okay to go into a veterans home benefits. And for me, the ultimate thing is the feeling that I got knowing that I was doing something that would hopefully make the lives of these vets a little bit better.

Stephanie: Yes. It sounds like you feel a personal connection to helping those people that are requesting the records. So, very much a “feel-good job.”

Michael: Yeah, it was. My family's fought in every war since the founding of the Republic. And one of my grandfathers tried to enlist in the Navy during World War II, and he ended up after his physical being discharged due to a stomach ulcer. And it was really exciting because it took a long time—but one day because during the refiling process after the fire, records were misfiled—and I would occasionally submit to get a copy of his Navy record knowing there wasn't much to it. But I still would like to have seen it. And finally, one day, it had been refilled in its proper spot. The Navy records were filed alphabetically. And so it popped up. And in there was a copy of the photograph for his Navy ID. Well, and I'm looking at that. He was 27 years old and I'm thinking he has lived half his life. I have an enlarged copy of that hanging on the basement or on one of the basement walls with pictures of other family members. But I look at him, and I think he's still got that determined look. And the only thing that was different was the high and tight buzz cut, because he wore his hair a little bit longer—about like I'm wearing mine right now. So yeah, that was a personal moment.

Stephanie: Yeah, that's wonderful. When you both first started at the building, can you describe maybe what the building looked like? Did you still smell smoke from the fire? What was that like when you first got there?

Cindy: Okay. I think it was an interesting building. It definitely had issues because of the fire. None of the systems worked properly. It seemed like there was always something that went wrong because you imagine that it was a lot of—they removed the sixth floor, but the rest of it, they retrofitted and left.

The B-files definitely smelled of smoke. And they had created a space in the basement where the B-files were housed. There were no windows, but it leaked and we would get water leaks on the floor. And Mike is shaking his head because he remembers, and we used to have these

long snake-like things. That's what they called them, snakes. And they were filled with sawdust and water absorbing material that would hopefully catch the water before it would go underneath the records because they were on metal shelves raised from the ground a few inches.

We used to have to go around every time there was a rainstorm and check all the leaks throughout the files and also up on the fifth floor because what was the roof was not built as a roof. It was a floor. It was originally the sixth floor—sixth floor floor. Sorry, I'm getting my F's mixed up there. And it leaked constantly. And one of the jobs I had at one point was monitoring and keeping track of those leaks. And we would put up plastic and tarps and buckets and we had a real fancy one that had a funnel with a hose on it that went down into a trashcan at one time that the GSA staff had put up. And I remember trying to send them information about, okay, this one's leaking more. We got a gallon of water out of it this time. We need to check that leak. One spring we had over 20 leaks in like three or four months. And they gave us a spot award because of all the time we spent upstairs checking on leaks. I think we had over 20 incidents where we had to remove boxes from the shelves because the records had gotten wet and we had to lay them out and dry them and make sure they didn't get moldy and nasty and gross.

It definitely affected the building from the outside. You can to this day—because the building is still standing—see the elevator shafts because they left them at the six-floor-tall height. Actually, I think it's above what would have been the six-foot floor because they went up so that you could get off onto the roof. And so you can see them from the street level, but you don't have any access to them. I don't know. I don't think they actually went up that high. But you can still see those sticking up from the roof line. What was your take on the building, Mike?

Michael: That entire building leaked like a sieve. The theoretical roof leaked all the time. It leaked around the windows. It leaked through the walls in the B-files—the burn-file bays in the basement. It would sometimes come up through the floor in those bays and you kind of became nose blind to it after a while. But, early on, when I started going into the burn-file bays, every time you walked in the door, you could smell that smoke, smell that ash smell. It's hard to get people to understand it and believe it unless you've actually experienced it. And then a few years ago, we started working to preserve records that were salvaged from the USS *Arizona* when she was sunk in Pearl Harbor. And you would open those records and you could still smell the smell of diesel fuel and fire. And there was sand in them. Sometimes there were little shards of metal in them, which led to a whole other conversation which I won't get into right now. But yet the smells from those damaged records was an experience.

Cindy: The B-files were the only part of the stacks that was air conditioned. And so you would get a lot of smells because of that. There was a vinegar smell from the fourth floor because they had nitrates. They weren't nitrate; I guess they just had film up there that was in the heat and the cold, and it got exposed to all the elements because of not having any air conditioning. I think there was heat in the winter, but there was no air conditioning and because of that people would open the windows and they thought it would be even better if they took the screens off, and that let the birds in. And the pigeons came in and we had issues with birds.

And so there was a big project to clean that all up. That took a couple of years to get that squared away before we actually moved into the new building. I remember I was one of the last ones to leave the building after we moved into the new building as the records were moved over, and they took all the records out of the B-files and the smell actually got worse. And I don't know if it was because they turned the air off, but it was so bad that if they opened that door when they were moving the shelving, it would smell. The entire basement would smell. Our lab was in the basement, only maybe 50 yards from the B-files, Mike? Yeah, about that much. It stunk so bad that you could tell when they were opening the doors in our lab because I never smelled it so much. I think it was because it was air conditioned before. And you could immediately tell that when it wasn't, because the overwhelming smell of mold and fire would just become extremely bad.

One of the things we noticed, too, when we were cleaning up the bird issues and some of the other things before we moved, was the records that had been stored in the regular stacks exposed to the heat in the summertime were in sometimes worse shape than the records in the B-files that had been in an air-conditioned-controlled environment minus the burned parts. But the part of the record that was stable was actually in better shape than the records that were in the heat and left and—there was little protection from the windows, they didn't have any curtains or any film on them that I'm aware of—and so they had a lot of sun damage too in that building.

Luckily, we have a nice new building that doesn't have those issues. We love it. The one thing they promised us was no roof leaks. And the first time I got in the building there was a leak, but they quickly fixed it. It was a seam in one of the—because they put it up in sections—one of the seams had a leak. And that was my first day in the new building, to deal with another leak. But I felt at home, so it was okay.

Stephanie: Wow. Yes, it sounds like lots of problems that you walked into on your first day. Were either of you involved in the move? The actual moving of the records to the new building?

Cindy: Well, we both were in some way. They had a company that did the physical moving of the records. But we tracked and monitored. And a big project that the Preservation Lab had was cleaning and removing the bird poop, because we didn't want to move it into the new building. And we sent out 13 diesel truckloads of records to a contractor to have them radiated to clean off the bird guano. And I was involved in that from the beginning—tracking and monitoring those records, making sure that the right records were pulled from the shelves, identified, placed on the shelves, and that we knew which records were out. We have so much volume going in and out of our records that we had hundreds of records that were out at the time the boxes were gone that needed to be refiled or pulled. And so I would keep track of that information and make sure that happened. And it took about four years to complete that process. I know, Mike, you were a move coordinator too, weren't you?

Michael: Yeah, for a while. I forget how many weeks I was actually subbing for someone who took off at the time because their wife had a baby. So six weeks, eight weeks, something like that. And that was basically just a checklist of what they were loading onto the trucks and just making sure that they had gotten all the boxes that they were supposed to be getting.

Stephanie: When the boxes were loaded—so these were ones that still needed some treatment done on them?

Cindy: Well, I think Mike's talking about the general records from the stacks. So that was the general move. The one I was talking about were ones that we identified that we sent to a contractor. So those were a little different. It was kind of happening in a parallel time.

Stephanie: In terms of Cindy, I know you mentioned the auxiliary records. Can either of you or both of you talk about maybe that process? And what are you looking for? What types of records are helpful? Anything about those types of records and how you're piecing together the official record.

Cindy: That's really done by the correspondence technicians, especially the reconstruction correspondence technicians. We don't have anything to do with that. Mike probably has more knowledge of that than I do.

Michael: Yeah, in a perfect world, when a service member completes their service, they're supposed to take one of the certified copies of their DD-214, their discharge document, to their local courthouse and make sure it's filed away there. Not all of them do it. And you know, with people, once they're out of the service, they sometimes have to deal with their own issues.

As far as their documents, they might get lost in a move or a fire at their house and it's lost. And so I tell every veteran I know to get at least three or four certified copies of your discharge papers and then make, if you have to, dozens of photocopies of those. Put one of those certified copies or two and a handful of those copies, if you can do it, like in a safe deposit box at your bank. Take everything else that you have and distribute it to your circle, your family, your close friends, so that all these people have copies of those things. In that worst-case scenario, if you are in a position where you can't speak for yourself, somebody's got a copy of that.

If you wait until the last minute, I don't know what the turnaround time is now from NPRC to get copies of stuff, but, even before, it could be weeks unless you are looking at burial benefits and then they can turn those around overnight.

But, make sure you've got a plethora of copies of those documents, and get them out there to friends, family, your pastor where you go to church so that somebody has them available for you just in case.

Cindy: I know they use morning reports. I know there's unit histories that they can use. I know we've microfilmed morning reports. That was a big project that we did for years, when I first started—and then we've been working on for years. Right now we're doing DD-214s, a series of DD-214s, which is the primary separation document. Recently we were working on records that were from World War I that were the widows' records, from the widows that were in the 30s, sent to Europe to visit the grave sites of the veterans, of their sons usually, widows and wives—it's mainly widows. And that was really interesting, because they had pictures of the mothers in their files, and it's just another piece of information that can fill out that story that's missing. And the correspondence technicians are really good at knowing where to go to find all kinds of information. They're very knowledgeable and skilled. And the ones that have been doing it for a long time have such a plethora of knowledge in their heads of where to find what I know. Right after the fire, there was a big push to not destroy any information that may be out there that would supplement what was lost, that all of the bases and service locations were told to not destroy anything. And that information from those places has been gathered and used for the last 50 years to try and fill in the gaps of that information that was lost. And, you know, we have 6 million records that were saved that are in our burn file base, but there were probably three or four times that that were destroyed that we have nothing of.

So that's something that we are aware of and that we work every day to try and mitigate. We do have what we call R-files, which are reconstructed files. And they're usually very small and

they have just the amount, just what they found in the past, working a case to try and get that veteran their benefits. And it's never going to be a full record again, but at least to show he served. Sometimes it's to get Agent Orange help. Sometimes it's, you know, all these issues that come up later in life that veterans need information about. Sometimes it's to get erroneous errors in their service, like their discharge, corrected maybe. Sometimes decisions weren't always based fairly. We have a lot of history in our country of not always being fair based on race. And you can see that in some of the records. And there's been work done to try and resolve some of those issues. And so the reconstruction work is really important for the veterans, for their families, and, you know, to try and do that. And the basis is to try and get a date in and a date out and figure out like what rank. I know, Mike, you can help me with what information they're looking for. He's the historian. I'm the objects person, if you haven't figured that out yet.

Michael: Most of the time it is benefits, but sometimes it's just getting a record corrected where they go through the board for the correction of military records, usually that would involve changing the character of discharge or ending of service. Sometimes it has to do with medals, decorations, that they weren't awarded. Quite often, like Cindy was mentioning before, that was a race-based issue back in the day. Trying to think of what else there could be.

Cindy: There's also work done—and Mike, you have experience with this, you followed this shortly before you left I know—we were doing quite a few records for the repro—losing my words for finding POWs—and getting the remains identified. And we haven't done as much of that since the pandemic. But that was a big push before, not before the fire, before the pandemic was to work on a lot of that stuff. And those were a lot of the records that were in our lab. And I remember you saying one time, maybe a year or so after he had worked on a record, he saw where they found the information, and were able to get it to the family.

Michael: Yeah. I can't remember if it was either a Vietnam soldier or maybe someone who had served in World War II. And then, nowadays you've got this, you know, it's not just the documents that we have anymore as far as those remains-recovery folks that work out in Hawaii. It's the miracle of DNA. And it makes it so much easier to locate them. I forget over the years how many people that they've identified as unknown from World War II that were buried usually at Punchbowl National Cemetery there in Hawaii. And they're able to identify these soldiers, these sailors, airmen, whatever, and get them home. And so the family then at least has a real sense of closure. Sometimes it would involve maybe a plane crash that happened in the jungle that, you know, they've just discovered 60 or 70 years later, and there's still some identifiable human remains in there and they can reunite those with the family. So, yeah, it's

just really cool the stuff that we can do with that now. You know, again, I don't understand how it all works, but it's just amazing.

Stephanie: How was that whole experience working with those records? Has it changed how you view records and the importance that they contain, that they have?

Cindy: Yes, and probably in ways you wouldn't think. I've realized that we have a lot of wasted space and margins that we don't use. You know, when you're working with burn records, you realize if the edge is burned, I haven't lost any information, so I've still got all the information there. I can give them everything they need here and feel satisfied. Once I've stabilized that paper, once I've got it clean—and it made me realize, too, in doing recovery, when we have water leaks and issues like that, that if we address it right away, you don't know that it ever happened. If we can get to those records, get them laid out and dried and flattened, you will never know it got wet. In all the years and all of the hundreds of boxes, probably thousands of boxes that we laid out, I don't think there was anything that had any lasting damage in it, from the records that were wet over the years in that building after the fire. Now, the things that we didn't get to right away, like if there was a slow leak that we didn't know about and it sat, the mold would get in that box and it would destroy the paper. It would eat the paper fibers and loosen it. And that damage, you could tell, had been there. And we weren't always able to—we couldn't put back what was lost. But if it's there, we can salvage it. And the amazing thing that Mike was talking about with the infrared photography that we're doing now, where we separate the paper and the ink and it's not as perfect—it's not a perfect piece of paper, but you can read it. You can glean the information.

And a lot of times in archives and in museums, we value the objects so much. But in this case, yes, the objects are important. And Mike always said, what are we going to do when we get down to the last record? Are we going to treat that or are we going to keep it as a burned record to document the fire? You know, yeah. As you know, he's brought that up to me sometimes, you know, do we leave something to show that there was a fire here, or do we make everything pristine again? And I think that we look at it primarily as the information is the most important thing. The paper is just the medium to carry that information. And, yes, the documents have a story themselves that they're giving, and at different times, I think different ways about it. You know, there's that constant juxtaposition between 'save the document' and 'provide the information.' We could lock these away and never let anyone have access to them. But what would be the point of that? And we constantly have to work on doing the best we can to protect the document so that everybody has access to it in the future. If we pull it and take the information, the paper is all ashy and we lose pieces of it and we stuff it back in its folder, and we don't do anything to protect it. We provide access to it one time, but then the next time

they go to get that folder, the information is no longer there because it fell off on the cart, then we've not served our veterans very well. We—Go ahead, Mike.

Michael: I was just going to say we're talking all the serious stuff here, but you do occasionally with some of the records that we dealt with, you have some humorous situations you would see, and it was primarily on medical records. You know, people doodling in the margins. They're writing, or they're drawing pictures of dogs or cats or birds or just, you know, like general doodles and stuff like that. And I remember, too, one record I worked on. It was a guy who was a surgeon in the Navy, and he had done a surgery on a second lieutenant—they said it was emergency hemorrhoid surgery. And the surgeon had kept like a little diary from the time this lieutenant came in until the time he was finally discharged. And some of the stuff that's in there, that he writes about—this guy was just absolutely hilarious. At one time, I remember seeing one line in there, you know, this second lieutenant is a literal pain in the ass and complaining about everything and, you know, stuff like that.

And then a situation we had back in, I think it was the early 2000s—and Cindy will remember this—we had a record that we opened up. There were a lot of documents that were stuck together, and it had like a maple smell. And the powers that be in the office, you know—we needed to somehow get this analyzed to determine what the substance is and blah, blah, blah, blah, blah, blah. And they send it off, I think, to the lab in Washington, DC, for analysis. And it came back and results of the analysis were that all the stuff that showed up were all the primary ingredients in Coca Cola. And, yeah so, you know, that was funny. And then just every once in a while you'd come across and I'd see stuff that was in the record.

Cindy: The watermelon story. Were you there for the watermelon story, Mike? The buckshot and the watermelon. The guys that tried to steal the watermelons got shot with buckshot. You know, just things like that.

Michael: Uh, the real reason that Jimi Hendrix got discharged from the Army. He always told people that he had broken his leg during a practice parachute jump, and that was not the case at all for his discharge. And then I remembered the reason was much more colorful. And then I remember in his record, too, one of his evaluation reports. His commanding officer says, "I don't think he's going to make it as a soldier. He kind of fancies himself as a guitar player."

You know, just stuff like that every once in a while would make you laugh. You'd be reading through a record and, sometimes, yeah, they were really, really serious what was going on. But other times in, you know, whether it was evaluation reports or sometimes the medical records,

I would just sit there and laugh and shake my head and it's like, you know, the occasional "Hey, y'all listen to this" or whatever. For me, it brought out the humanity of it all.

Stephanie: Do either of you feel that there is something that comes to mind that you think is your greatest accomplishment or something that just really sticks out in your career at the Archives, something maybe you came across like some of the things you mentioned, Michael, or anything that you feel like you've really accomplished something?

Michael: A couple of things. The major point is doing stuff to help these veterans and their families. You know, ultimately, that's what it's all about. My personal pride is back in the day when Twitter was first becoming a thing, and they were just letting regular employees take over the Twitter page for a week. And so I volunteered to do that for a week. And at least up until that time, the NARA Twitter page got more hits than it had ever gotten. And, I'm kind of just putting up stuff that we do in the lab and then things that like I was just talking about, things that you brought up or that would come up that, you know, you would just kind of find humorous, other things, you know.

Somewhere in the collection is a small record for Ernie Pyle, the World War II combat reporter who started out in Europe, and then when the war there ended, he went to the South Pacific. And he was killed by a Japanese sniper. And there was a photo in there, and it was his, I guess you'd call it, postmortem photo. It was taken from a little bit of a distance and his body had been recovered and, you know, just laid like, I think, on a rock wherever they were at. There's nothing else in the photo apart from the natural stuff but him, and it was just kind of a—looking at that, for me at least, it was just kind of a lonely feeling.

And then I started to imagine how many other people during that war—it was the same thing for them in the end. And then occasionally you'd—there was a picture one time of a World War I soldier, I think somewhere here in the States, who had actually died of influenza. And they prepared the body and put him in his coffin. And it was one of those, you know, shaped like that [drawing a triangular-top-shaped coffin] and stood him up to be photographed. And the dude didn't have—they didn't have a stitch of clothing on him. And I just kind of looked at that and thought, you know, what a way to be remembered, naked in your own casket. And just stuff like that.

You know, for me at least, I really started to realize that things are a lot different during war and on the battlefield, and that would occasionally really hit home.

Cindy: I just got an email about a week ago saying we're supposed to identify those, if there's remains photographs and make sure that they're put in a place where they're not accessed so they have their dignity back. It was just something that came up in the last week or two in our office. It was interesting that you brought that up. Sorry if I cut you off, Mike.

Michael: No.

Cindy: For me, to answer that question would be the process I helped develop and start in the lab for humidifying records that are really distorted. We went from it taking 12 to 24 hours to process a batch of records to 15 minutes. And for me, that was probably the biggest accomplishment. The intern that we had at the time, Emily—do you remember Emily's last name, Mike? I want to say it was Thompson, but I don't know if that's correct. I can't remember. It's been about seven or eight years now. Yeah.

Michael: Thompson.

Cindy: Thompson, yeah. Her and I worked on it for a while, establishing the process and procedure for using our humidifier and the chamber rather than using trays. And it really made a difference. We started with a small project with some JAG [Judge Advocate General's Corps] records that were mimeographed using an ink that was completely water soluble, but they needed to be flattened. And so we developed a process for them, and then we expanded it and promoted the use of it throughout all the work we did with B-files. And it speeded up the process substantially and helped us to serve more veterans. And for me, overall in my career, that's probably one of the things I'm the most proud of and feel the most accomplishment for, because I think it's made a difference overall for many years, you know, and moving forward. There's a lot that we have to do that we can influence and make differences for. And when we, in our department, for years it was 'go and do the job, get it done, go home, do it again the next day,' and as technicians, we weren't really given a lot of opportunities to provide new ideas, to promote things that we thought were important. And so when those opportunities came and when I was able to work on that, it really made a difference and helped, I think, myself and other people to realize that there's a lot we can do if we think outside the box.

And like I said at the beginning, the pandemic really forced us as a lab—and we have some great management there now that are really working towards improving things and taking ideas and suggestions and moving forward. We're working on digital delivery of the records that we scan. We're hoping to be able to implement that soon with the VA especially, and that'll just improve our processes and make things better, and I love the idea that we can continue to improve. We can do more. We can do better, and we can provide better access to

these records. Mike is probably better at answering this, but he, a few years ago, figured out how many records we had treated and made into safe files, and at the rate we were going, we would have enough work to keep us busy for about 500 years. And we'd been working on this for almost 20 years at that point.

And so it made us realize overall that we needed to change the way we were doing things. And during the pandemic, we completely rethought our processes. We went from treating and stabilizing and flattening and cleaning every record that went through our lab to bringing it in, analyzing it, removing what mold we had to, making a clean scan of it, scanning the record, and putting it back. We provide access through the scans now, and we're hoping that that will be something that allows us to treat more records, to serve more veterans and still maintain the integrity of the records. It's a balancing act constantly. There are pros and cons of both approaches, but when you're talking about records burned in a fire or distorted or moldy from a fire, there's a lot of work involved, especially a collection as large as this one. The majority of archives out there probably don't have half or a quarter of the amount of just our B-file collection. And so we're looking at millions of records that we are trying to provide access to, and you're constantly trying to find new ways and safe ways of being able to do that. And that's our primary focus as a preservation department, is to provide access to the information while safeguarding the record. Because if we provide access today, but we lose information that isn't there for the next request, then have we really accomplished our mission?

Michael: Yeah. And what Cindy brought up, it was some—I won't mention any names because they still work there, but I would call them an upper middle management person who brought up, as far as the burn files, "Why don't we just start with number one and work our way all the way through to the end to number roughly 7 million?" And so I did some calculations just based on, you know, nothing nearly scientific but ballpark, the average amount of time that it took us to work on a record; the average number of documents that were in the average burn record, which was 88 sheets; the average amount of time it took us to work on a record that size. And I think it actually came out to like—if we started there and ended with this one and going through, I think it was something like 698 years. So I was telling all my friends, if you're looking for a good racket to get into, get into this. Get your grandkids, your great grandkids, great, great grandkids and expand exponentially out through what would probably be well after the end of humanity, and they're going to have a job. And needless to say, it didn't happen.

Stephanie: Yeah, that would be job security for sure. That sounds kind of like a mix of, like, with the upgrades and technology, you know, over time, and then especially during the COVID-19 pandemic, that and then also just having staff think outside the box has really moved us, you know, ahead further and much quicker than what it would have been before.

Cindy: Yeah, it really has. When I think about the fire, there was the initial response right after the fire. There was the “stabilize the building, get the records out,” you know, the “tent city in the parking lot, sorting the records, getting them cleaned.” They created a registry. You know, there's a first time we went from the alphabet to, you know, numbering each record and having an identifier for each one. And then trying to piece things back together. And they did that. That was the first 20 years after the fire.

And then when the Preservation Lab was established at the beginning of the 2000s or right before the 2000s, I think it had been here maybe two years before we started. That was the beginning of really treating the records and not just using them as a tool to get information, but realizing that we needed to stabilize them, that we needed to make sure that information was there for the next request. And so we worked on that for about 20 years, up until the pandemic, and then we had to all of a sudden get these records out now, and we had to stop saying we want to treat it, we want to clean it. We want to make it pretty before you can touch it. You know, we had to just rethink things.

And one of the other things we realized is there's new information coming out about the way you clean mold and how much mold is left in the paper. And that's really kind of informed us that even though you can't see the mold after we've brushed it off or sponged it off, it's still in the paper fibers. And we were putting the cleaned records back into our regular stack areas. We had a designated area, but it was in the regular stack areas that are housed with air conditioning. That's like office space air conditioning. And the B-files are housed in cool storage, though they're in the 50-degree range rather than 70, you know. And we realized that maybe that wasn't a good idea. And so the rethink was if we just scan them and put them back where they were, maybe we're actually doing better for the records than we are putting them in the regular storage. Even though it looks clean, it may not be as clean.

And so some of that knowledge has really informed us. And moving forward, we're working on technology and how we can better utilize technology. And I think the next 20 years or so is going to show us, like you said, how we can be inventive. How can we rethink the processes and make our approach to the access of this information even better? And as we, as an agency, deal with the shortage of space, you know, as an agency, we have to think about it. We're always concerned that all of a sudden they're going to come and go, “Well, let's just get rid of the B-files. They're not necessary anymore,” you know. And that's always kind of been a fear of ours because they're our baby. They are our purpose for existing—is to work with those files. And so we kind of are connected to them in a way that maybe sometimes we have to take a step back, you know, at times and realize. But we're working on trying to balance that out. And you're

right. Technology is a huge part of that and staff innovation and bringing in new staff, thinking about things in a different way. You know, just last week got a new head to our department and we're excited to have Vicki on board. She's wonderful and is one of the people that's really helped us through the pandemic to change some things. And I think moving forward, I'm really excited to be a part of what we're doing now because I think we have a really good balanced approach to when we need to do more detailed treatment on something and when we need to just capture the information and send it to the requester so that they can get that information. We can move on to the next request because there are a lot of people that need this information, that need to have access to these records. It's the most actively used collection in all of NARA.

Stephanie: Do you know about how many requests come in? I don't know, say, per week or so?

Cindy: Overall, I should know that—I know for the B-files, because those are the records that we handle, we get probably, oh, it can be anywhere between 500 to 1,000 records a week that are requested just for the files and center-wide. It's a lot. It's a lot. It's in the thousands. Okay. I mean, it's astronomical. And some of the archives technicians can probably—archival staff probably have a better idea of, overall, how many come into the building. I know NPRC puts out stats where they were for a while during the pandemic trying to keep us on track. I know our backlog was quite large. We were looking at over a 100,000 records backlog kind of thing, you know, so we're talking about a lot. We have over 600 people that work at NPRC here, and it's a large staff, and most of them are correspondence technicians that work cases every day. So it's getting a handle on that. If you're not in here, it's kind of eye opening, I think, to a lot of people to realize just the amount of work that is done. You know, this affects this collection of records, these personnel records for the military service from, mainly from the last century, affects, like Mike said, just about every family. And just about every generation has somebody who served in the military. And until they went digital, everything was here. And even with the digital, there's still some stuff that we have to do to certify stuff that the correspondence technicians work with. So it's a lot of responsibility and a lot of pressure that's put on people and they feel it. And there's a lot of tension in this building. If you talk to people and you walk down the halls, everybody's trying to get more done with less time and less resources.

Stephanie: Well, both of you, when you're talking about your jobs—it just seems very, very meaningful what you do and how you relate to your responsibilities.

Michael, I know that you are retired. Do you remember what your last day was like? What was it like to leave the agency and what do you miss the most?

Michael: I really didn't want to leave, but, you know, circumstances prevailed. I guess the thing I miss most of all is most of my co-workers. And I had an opportunity just a couple of weeks or so ago—they had their spring picnic not too far away. And I made up my mind, I was going to go. And most everybody was there. There were maybe one or two that were missing that had other commitments that I would have liked to have seen, too. But yeah, most of the people that I worked with and, you know, that we work with had such a commitment to doing the job and doing it right. So, yeah, I think that, probably more than anything.

Stephanie: And Cindy, I know that you are still working there. Are you looking forward to retirement, and what would you miss the most if you were, say, to retire tomorrow? What would you miss the most?

Cindy: Oh, well, that would be exciting. I've got 20 years left. Honestly, I love the work I do. I love trying to find new ways of doing things like to solve problems that keep it interesting. I really would miss my co-workers; they are great. And like we've said all along, I've always known that I couldn't do it; I couldn't be a car salesman. I can't swindle people for a living or just pawn off things, useless stuff on somebody in a shop somewhere. You know, I have to feel like I'm helping someone, that I'm serving society and that I'm giving something back. And I didn't have the opportunity—I didn't take the opportunity to serve in the military. So this is a chance for me to serve the people that did and to serve my country and to feel like I'm doing something of value and giving something to people that need it. And I think that would be something that I would find missing in my life. I like to do things outside of work, so I like to think that I would be just fine in retirement. But yeah, I would miss it too.

Michael: There was a piece I wrote for. I think it was for the *Prologue*, either website or Facebook page, maybe 10 years ago. And if you haven't seen it, it's pretty short and I just called it "It's why I do what I do." And they still—it's like they recycle that one every couple of years and put it back up there and, you know, yeah, I get a little, you know, I did that.

Stephanie: Yeah. We'll have to look that one up.

Cindy: Mike's also done a lot, after he retired, with the interviews with the firefighters, that I think is really cool with talking to the rookies that were there because it's been 50 years, so they're pretty young—were pretty young when they fought it. But some of those stories are just fascinating that he got with Captain Dave.

Michael: Yeah, the one I really miss not being able to interview—I had a good friend. His name was Bob Palmer. And he retired as chief of the Mehlville Fire Department up here and was

down south St. Louis County and he—I forget exactly when he died, but it was while I was still working—and he had worked—he was a rookie. When he got called to work that fire—and I can't remember right now if it was one of the—if it was one of the first he worked or if it was the first that he worked. I think it might have been one of the first. And he was the first person I met because I'd always had an interest in that fire, and the first person that I had met that I was able to really get some details from. He talked about how at that time so much of the stuff was stored in filing cabinets. And as things cooled down and they were able to actually go into the areas that had been burning, he said we'd open up a filing cabinet and it would reignite. And he said—so it got to the point where you had one man there with a hose and another guy to open the top drawer on the cabinet. And as soon as they pulled that drawer open, the other guy hit it with the hose and flooded it. And, you know, stuff like that that you just realize, you know, it was just little things and quick thinking on the part of a firefighter that, in the end, saved a lot of records.

And then, I think, Captain Dave found me while I was still working at the center, and we started communicating. And then we got the idea to do the—or he got the idea, actually—to do the firefighter interviews. And I think we ended up interviewing 12 or 13 of them. And probably the most important one was a guy named Andy Klein, and he was the first firefighter in the building. And I think I sent you the link to the [YouTube page](#). Okay. And these guys, you know, when we were talking to him a few years ago, after all these years, that was still like the highlight of their careers. The thing that they remembered most—and once you kind of grease the gears with them a little bit—you know, stuff that would come back. And there was one in particular. I think it might have been the first guy we actually interviewed and I can't remember his name right now. But, you know, when we first sat down with him before we turned on the GoPro and he was like, "Well, you know, you're probably not going to get too much from me. There's not a whole lot I can remember." But, you know, you get into it then and then you get the leading questions and then other questions, you know, based on stuff that they said. And then it ended up that the interview went longer than either Dave or I had expected. And, you know, it was just such a real joy and an experience to be able to sit down and talk with these guys and ask these questions. And then, you know, when you told them that you were going to put it up on a YouTube page, so all your friends, all your family, can see it then, "Oh, really?" And, "Well, you're going to be a YouTube star." And you know that really piqued them. Yeah, so that was kind of fun to watch. But, you know, it was just great to at least have those sources that we could still get some information from.

Stephanie: Right. It's those things that you don't read about in the newspaper about the fire. You have to hear it from them. You know, those little tidbits like the filing cabinet that you just mentioned and the fire hose. So, yeah, very important information.

Michael: And the—every one of them, if they didn't do it on camera, they did it like while we were setting up or while we were breaking down, talked about their face masks getting so hot that they melted. That's how hot that fire was. And I think it might have been Andy Klein, and, you know, the first responders were there in like four minutes. He said going up and when they got to those six floor entrances, he said you could already—the doors were closed up—but the closer you got to the door that they ultimately went into that, you know, you're 20 feet away from it or whatever, and you can already feel the heat. And then when you do go in, it's so smoky that you're having to go in either crouched really low or down, crawling on the floor just so you can see where you were going. And there's—I know at least a few of the photographs that Captain Dave has and if you've seen those, you can tell that they're taken while things were still going on because up kind of close to the ceiling, you can see the layer of smoke. I think the best ones that were taken were—and there weren't that many of them and Dave's got them—were the ones that Bob Palmer that I mentioned earlier took because he was like, you know, "I was a kid. I was a rookie. I took a camera with me everywhere." You know, he took some, not just inside the files, but the shots of some of the guys outside while they were working this fire. Some of the photographs are amazing. There's a real short blip of video. I think you can find it on YouTube if you just type in 'NPRC Fire.' And it's somebody that lived in that area, their home movies. And it's just a few seconds right at the start of this one. From a distance, you can see, you know, they're filming the building burning. And I've tried over the years to get video from the various news stations here in town. You know, sometimes you never hear back or sometimes, "Oh, yeah, we probably got it. But you know, it's going to take forever to find it." And so, that's another source that maybe you could wield a little bit of leverage because they've all got their video archives. So it's out there somewhere.

Stephanie: Well, we're coming up on the end of the hour and a half that we set aside for the interview. Is there anything that either of you want to add that we haven't already discussed?

Michael: A couple of things real quick as far as the fire. Uh, the director at NPRC has a copy of the official FBI report. If you haven't seen that yet, all I will say is I encourage you, and it's huge to get it and read it.

Cindy: They've been scanning it, like it's out there.

Michael: And also—I was looking for it before the meeting started, but I couldn't find the link—there was a guy a few years ago who wrote an article about how the fire started, and a certain individual that was working at the center at that time, and how things ultimately played out. Have either of you found that online? Okay. I'm going to go in and look for it. And when I find it,

I'll send you the link. It's very interesting. And I will say that his theory and conclusion jive with what I saw in the FBI report. That's all I got.

Stephanie: Okay. Yeah, that'd be great. Thank you. And Cindy, did you have anything else you want to add as well?

Cindy: Oh, I just can't think of anything right off the bat. I know you probably got the stories about the firefighters shooting the water guns through the windows and shooting things down the aisles. But because they were rookies and they were playing with new equipment that they hadn't used before, I know Creve Coeur had a brand new water gun that they used on that fire. I think it was the first time it had been deployed, and I think some people had some fun with it. These were 20-something-year-old guys for the most part, and they were working extra shifts, you know, for weeks, pouring water on that fire. So just the thought of it just blows me away. I know all my coworkers yesterday, we were going through pictures, getting ready for stuff for our congressional visit that is in a couple of weeks. We were putting together, you know, some photographs for that. And one of them goes, "I would have left that day and never come back." You know, the thought of what those people had to do to recover all that information and the effort that was put forward by our predecessors to bring us to the point we are now. We look at some of the stuff they did and we think, oh, we would never do it that way today. But they managed to save 6 million records from that fire. And the—actually all of the records that are in that center, 6 million were burned and damaged by the fire. But all of those records—we have 15 bays full of records now because those firefighters and those people fought so hard to keep that information safe and to make sure it's accessible to us today. Those are true heroes on both sides of that fire. And I just am so grateful for the heritage that we stand on for the people's shoulders that we are able to work. I have a job today because they saved those records, and I remember that every day.

Michael: And stuff with the firefighters, too. Just little things. Like every once in a while, yeah, they blast each other with their hoses and—but then things, too, like all the fast food joints that were around there at the time. When they got wind of what was happening, you know, they were bringing in free food and free drinks and stuff to the guys that were fighting the fires. And, you know, just little stuff like that. It's the little stories sometimes that can be the most meaningful or the most humorous or the most, you know, just regular. You know that some of the guys told us, you know, "We just looked at it," you know, "we were doing our jobs and nobody got hurt or killed." You know, there was, I think, one—throughout the whole time that they were dealing with that, I think—there was one minor injury to a firefighter. And that was it out of—Dave's got the list of all the guys that worked that fire. You know, just hundreds of

them. And to just have one guy with a minor injury— that was just a miracle, considering the situation.

Stephanie: Yeah, it's amazing that more people didn't get hurt and that it could have been so much worse. You know, people getting hurt or, you know, all of the records could be gone. Right? So it's amazing. Yeah, it's amazing.

Michael: And the fact that it was the Navy that didn't want to put sprinklers in that building. They were afraid they would leak.

Cindy: Some irony there.

Stephanie: Well, I think that is all I have. Jessie, did you have anything else that you wanted to follow up on?

Jessie: No, I think you both did such a good job anticipating all the questions that I kept jotting down and you answered them. So I guess—.

Michael: I saw your cat was helping you, too.

Jessie: I know. It's lunch time. But I just want to thank you guys for providing this really important service to our veterans and sharing your stories with us. And it's obvious that you both really enjoy the work that you do. Yeah.

Cindy: Thanks for giving us a chance to share. It's important. We're glad somebody's remembering this fire. Mike's been asking me for months: "What are they doing about the fire? What are they doing about the fire?" So thank you for letting us participate. We appreciate it.

Michael: And if you come up with anything else, you know where to find me.

Stephanie: Okay. Yes. I'll reach out to you once the meeting is over. If either of you have any photos that you want to share, you know, the fire or just of yourselves that we can post along with your interview, that would be great, also.

Cindy: Okay. I think you have access to all the photos I have. Mike might have some that the center doesn't have. I know you do.

Michael: Okay. I turned all that stuff over to Dave, which reminds me, he's probably already told you, but he had cassettes of the calls for the whole period, the fire calls. And a few years ago we had a friend who was an audio engineer. And we transferred them to CD. And so Dave's got that, and I'm sure some of it can be really hard to hear. But I'm sure technology has improved enough now that, you know, if you can get him to burn you copies of those CDs and send them to you, you've got something you can run them through and improve them. Improve them just that much more.

Stephanie: Well, you have given us so much information today and just, you know, for things to follow up on. This is extremely helpful. We really appreciate both of you taking time out today to talk to us.

Cindy: Thank you. Yeah.

Michael: Dave Dubowski is your man.

Stephanie: Okay.

Cindy: He's a good one.

Michael: Yeah, he's a good guy.

Cindy: Yeah. And he's the one that comes and checks our building. He's the closest to us, too, which is interesting that he's the one that keeps us safe. So, yeah.

Cindy: All right. Thank you, guys.

Stephanie: Well, thank you so much. And, yes, I'll reach out to you here shortly. All right. Thank you. Bye.

Michael: Bye.

[END RECORDING]