

U.S. NATIONAL ARCHIVES AND RECORDS ADMINISTRATION

Oral History Interviews
Subject: William Seibert
Interviewer: Rebecca Watford
Date: 09/22/2017

[START RECORDING]
[Phone ringing]

Mr. William Seibert: Bill Seibert, may I help you?

Ms. Rebecca Watford: Hi, this is Rebecca Watford.

Bill: Oh, hi. How are you?

Rebecca: Good, you?

Bill: I'm okay. I'm going to close my office door and put you on speaker phone, is that all right?

Rebecca: Yes, sir, and I'm recording the phone call as you do it.

Bill: Okay, thank you. Hold on. Hi, can you hear me?

Rebecca: Yes, sir.

Bill: I can hear you, let me close the door. Hello everybody [to people outside. Closes door and returns]. Okay.

Rebecca: All right. Let me do the metadata really quick, and then we can start.

Bill: Sure.

Rebecca: Today is Friday, September 22nd, 2017. On the phone is William SAY-bert—

Bill: [Interposing] SIGH-bert.

Rebecca:—oh, Seibert, what was it?

Bill: Seibert, yes.

Rebecca: Okay. Who is a Senior Archivist and Chief of Archival Operations at the National Archives at St. Louis.

Bill: That's right.

Rebecca: My name is Rebecca Watford. I am an Intern in the History Office at the National Archives in Washington, D.C. So, Mr. Seibert, what is your background prior to working at the National Archives?

Bill: I came to work at the Archives a few years after I finished my academic work. I returned to St. Louis in 1975 and for a brief time was involved in a number of projects having to do with architectural history here in the St. Louis area. Also spent a year or so in a family business, but then in 1978 I took what was then known as the PACE Exam, which was an examination for the civil service. And at some point after that, I think it was in '77 or '78 that I took that exam, and then in '78 I was contacted by the National Archives and Records Service, as it then was, here in St. Louis and offered a job at the National Personnel Records Center. So since 1978 I have been employed by the National Archives.

Rebecca: All right. So what do you do at the National Archives? What is your job?

Bill: Well I am the Chief of Archival Operations at the National Archives at St. Louis, which is a field location of the Office of Records Services, as it's currently organized. And we hold the accessioned records of ... Basically our collection is unique, in that it's a national collection, it is not as in the other field locations, it is not a regional collection of federal records but it's a national collection. And they really are the personal data records held by the National Archives and created by the Federal government. In other words, records about people rather than about government offices and organizations.

Rebecca: Can you tell me about the programs that you've worked on at the National Archives?

Bill: Well, yes, when I started out I was, as I say, I was a CIDS (Career Intern Development System) trainee working for the National Personnel Records Center, and my first position after training was in the Records Reconstruction Branch, which was charged with providing reference on the records that were affected by the disastrous fire that took place at the National Personnel Records Center in 1973 and that destroyed upwards of 16- to 18 million records of individuals who served in the Army and the Army Air Forces and the Air Force between 1912 and 1963—basically, those who served during two World Wars and the Korean War. And what we did, we, again, provided reference on the records that were salvaged from the fire, and we reconstructed individual service histories of those individuals whose records were destroyed in that fire. And I was a Section Chief in the Reconstruction Branch, in one of the Correspondence Sections in that Branch.

And I worked there for a number of years, and then I was selected as Assistant Branch Chief in the Air Force Branch of NPRC at that time. The branches were organized by military service—in the military facility, they were organized by military service branch. So there was an Army Branch, a Navy Branch, an Air Force Branch, and then there was the Reconstruction Branch. And when I left the Reconstruction Branch, I went into the Air Force Reference Branch as the

Assistant Branch Chief.

And then after a few years there, I was selected to work as an Appraisal Archivist, appraising a collection—I think as my CV mentioned, located in the St. Louis Military Records Facility was a collection of about 100,000 cubic feet of records of military field commands. These records were sort of the anomaly in St. Louis. As I said, in St. Louis, the main type of records held here are individual service records of military people and civil servants. The collection that I'm referring to now were records of organizations. They were records about military field organizations, their programmatic records, their administrative records, and so forth. Different type of records from the personnel records. There was a project to appraise all of these 100,000-plus cubic feet of records which were unscheduled. And we worked, there were two of us that worked as Appraisal Archivists systematically examining these records and appraising them for their archival value, separating what were determined to be records of permanent value from the records that were of temporary value and could be disposed. And that project is still going on. It began a few years earlier, about 1976, and it continues on today.

But I worked in that project, and then after time I was also appointed as the Chief of the Appraisal and Disposition Section at the Military Records Facility of NPRC. So I sort of had a dual role as Appraisal Archivist and also as the manager of the Appraisal and Disposition Section of the Record Center. And then in 2000, after a decision was made by the Archivist of the United States that the military personnel files were a permanent series that would be accessioned into the National Archives—prior to that time the records were contingent—identified as ... their status was basically in limbo. No one had proposed disposing of them, but they had not yet been determined to be of permanent value. They were in what is called a contingent status.

But as I said, in April of 1999 the Archivist made the determination that the military personnel records were permanent, and that triggered the establishment of an archival unit in St. Louis. Prior to that the only organization here was the Federal Records Center, the National Personnel Record Center. But in 2000 an archival presence was established here in St. Louis, and the first unit was a Preservation unit that was specifically mandated by Congress to take action to preserve the records that were salvaged from the 1973 fire, what we refer to as the Burned Records. And I was appointed as the Preservation Officer with the task of setting up that unit, staffing it and developing the preservation labs that would be needed to fulfill that function of preserving those records. That was in 2000.

In 2004 an archival, full-fledged archival ... unit was established in St. Louis that would deal with reference and all the other archival functions other than preservation. And I was appointed as the Chief of that organization, which is what I do today. And we, again, our task was to establish that organization from the ground up. We have a Public Research Room here, obviously, now. And we have a Reference Branch and also a Processing and Access Branch. And then those are sort of the three functional units within the National Archives at St. Louis. And I manage those three operational areas here. So that's what I do.

Rebecca: Okay. What, I'll ask this so I have the complete timeframe, how—

Bill: [Interposing] Pardon?

Rebecca:—long were you at the Archives in number of years?

Bill: I didn't hear the first part of that.

Rebecca: Oh, I was just asking—I said you've already said when you started, I just need to know when, the number of years you've been doing that—

Bill: [Interposing] Oh, yeah, well from 1978 to 2017 ... is... hmmm... that would be 39 years. That plus my military service and accumulated sick leave and so forth means that I've ended up with 43 years, a little over 43 years of creditable federal civil service.

Rebecca: What did you do in the military?

Bill: I was in the Army. I was drafted during the Vietnam period. I had been in graduate school at Oxford University in the United Kingdom, and, but I was in the Vietnam draft. So then I had to—living overseas, a lot of us that were there had to make the decision as to whether we would stay or go back and participate in a war that we did not believe in. So my sort of—I felt that the long-range thing to do would be to return and to serve.

So I was in the Army from 1969 through the spring of 1972. I was part of the—President Nixon after his opening to China began a major reduction in force in the military, and those of us who were due to separate in less than a year were given an early out. So I served all of 2½ years and then was discharged in April of 1972, and fortunately I was able to ... the organization that provided the scholarship that I was on at the University of Oxford when I left in '69, they said they would hold my scholarship and I was welcome to return, so in April of '72 I returned to the United Kingdom and continued to study there. Finishing up in 1974, late '74 and returning to my home in St. Louis in 1975.

Rebecca: Do you feel like your military background served you well in working for the Archives in St. Louis?

Bill: [Interposing] Oh, oh, definitely. That really was a fortunate occurrence, because the work that I eventually [Laughing] did in the Army was actually personnel related, and so when I applied to work for the National Archives and especially here in St. Louis, the main holdings are basically personnel records. Of course, I knew the Army records, but I had to learn the records of the other military services and also the records of the civil service, which are a major portion of our holdings here at the National Archives in St. Louis. But it was a great sort of a ... a start, because I had worked with a lot of those records when I was actually in the military.

Rebecca: Did you have a background in preservation before you came to the Archives?

Bill: No. That was interesting. They felt when they established the Preservation Program in 2000 that they wanted somebody to initially head it up at the beginning who understood the records. And then the way it worked out is I was selected as the Preservation Officer but was able to select two outstanding records conservators to work with me, and actually one of those people succeeded me as the Preservation Officer here, Marta O'Neill, who has an amazing background in preservation as well as in archives. So they wanted somebody who had a deep background in the records and knew the condition of the records and would be able to prioritize the work. And so that's why, I think, why I applied for the job and why I was selected. But my major interest and background, of course, was in archives and in history as opposed to preservation and conservation.

Rebecca: Why did you initially apply to work at the Archives?

Bill: Well, because my academic background and my greatest interest is in history. I really did not, never desired to be a teacher. So really, the other major way to work in history is to work with the primary sources. And that's of course what archives is, what archivists do. They work to identify and make accessible historical records. So that's what appealed to me about archives and certainly the National Archives. Which is, you know, the professional leader in this country.

Rebecca: Do you think you've learned a lot from being in the archives, for being there for 39 years?

Bill: Oh, my goodness, tremendous amount, yeah. You really learn a lot about the history of the United States Government and all of the functions that the government performs, and it's fascinating work, and you learn something every day, really.

Rebecca: What are some things that you've learned that have surprised you over the years from working at the Archives?

Bill: Hmm. Well, I would say, understanding the complexity of bureaucracies, both of military and civilian bureaucracies. And how they evolved and developed has been pretty ... a pretty amazing learning experience. If you want to know what I think are the most significant activities that I've been involved in over these years, I can name four of them [Laughing] right off the bat. If that would be of interest.

Rebecca: Go ahead, go for it.

Bill: Sure. I was, my colleague and I, she no longer works for NARA, but is one of the most ... she's one of the most brilliant archivists I've ever worked with. She was working here at the time. We were named as the, basically, the support people for a task force that was appointed by the Acting Archivist in 1995 to look into the appraisal of the—to deal with—to make a decision as to the ultimate disposition of the military personnel records that were held in St. Louis, the Official Military Personnel Files is what they're actually called. They're the individual service histories of people who have served the United States in the Armed Forces starting—

the earliest ones that are out here are from the last third of the 19th century. The prior, the earlier records that have been part of the National Archives in Washington, and are held in the National Archives building, have been among the most heavily accessed record series in NARA's history. So the question is, okay, huh, we have held the early records of those who served in the Armed Forces of the United States beginning in the Revolutionary War, what about the people that served in that capacity from the last third of the 19th century and through the 20th century? And this task force was directed by the Archivist to come up with a decision.

The decision that we came up with was that these records were of permanent value for the people of the United States and should be accessioned by the National Archives. And that's what eventually happened, in the year 1999, as I said, the Archivist at that time, John Carlin, issued the decision that the military service records held in St. Louis were permanently valuable records of the United States and would be accessioned into the National Archives. In one fell swoop, the holdings of the National Archives increase by almost, I would say, close to 40 percent. Anyway, it was a major, major decision.

And that was followed a few years later by another task force appointed by the Archivist to look at the value, the archival value, of the records of individuals who served the United States government as civil servants. And those records were also held here in St. Louis. And they are held here, and that working group, which I also was on, made the recommendation that records held here, which really date to the beginning of the civil service in the 19th century, that those records up through 1973 should be also brought into the holdings of the National Archives. Records of civil servants who served the government in 1974 and later, their records, basically, are held in electronic form, and so the paper records were deemed not to be of permanent value, the later records. But the records created prior to 1974 were recommended for permanent retention, and that recommendation was accepted and was approved by the Archivist. So that represents about over 200,000 cubic feet of records of civil servants, the people that served the United States in a civil service capacity.

So being involved in those two ... really ... seminal appraisal efforts was really a privilege and I feel, you know, I've served history very well in having been a part of that. I think subsequent years have borne out the correctness of our appraisal decision, because we, here in St. Louis, are—the reference that we perform on those records is—we are—our Public Research Room is the third-busiest in the system after the one in College Park, and I think our level of business that we, number of researchers that come to us here actually surpasses the number that come down to Archives I. So the interest in these records is tremendous. Of course the interest is ... a big part of the interest is in their use in family history and genealogy but also especially the records—well, the military and civil service records are increasingly used by historians doing ... research in the history of the Federal government and the United States.

So, those two activities I think stand out in terms of evaluating the time I spent here. Also, I was pretty much responsible for the reappraisal of the records of the Selective Service that were held in the records centers of the National Archives, basically, the draft records. Which have been used here—I became familiar with those records when I first started working in the

Records Reconstruction Branch, 'cause those records are critical to being able to reconstruct individual service histories of people who served in the Army and in the Air Force during the First—well, certainly, during the Second World War and subsequent to that in the Korean and Vietnam Wars. And those records were slated for disposal, for destruction, and when we—when that was brought to my attention I, you know, advocated and was successful in having that disposition changed, and we have subsequently accessioned the records, the draft registration and classification records for millions of American men. I think the question now, I think, has become, will women be subject to the current draft? I don't know if that has been decided yet, but certainly those records that document the people that served in the Second World War and in the Korean War and the Vietnam War are now safely held in the National Archives here in St. Louis and will be available in perpetuity. So that was another major accomplishment.

And I think most recently, in recent years, the last eight or nine years, I've been actively involved in bringing in the records of another important series, the records, they're known as the Individual Deceased Personnel Files. These are records created by the Army and that document the circumstances of death of persons who really were in all branches of service. The Army until the mid-1950s had the task of dealing with casualties in all branches. And those records, again, have always been an important group of records for us in reconstructing military service histories but especially important, the people that, you know, made the ultimate sacrifice and were the casualties of war in World Wars and in inter-war periods as well. People that died in service. So those records are in the process of coming into our holdings as well. But ... all told, about 15,000 cubic feet of records that go back to—the earliest ones in that group are from 1939 forward through 1976, through the end of the Vietnam War. So anyway, I would say, if I were asked what the highlights of my time working for NARA, those, bringing those four groups of records into the collections of the National Archives and ensuring their permanent retention for the American people is probably, I would say, the most significant activities that I've been involved in.

Rebecca: How would you say St. Louis has grown in the archival field according to size and in the work you're doing since you've been there?

Bill: Well I mean I think it's ... in terms of archives, yeah, it's just ... you know, it's expanded tremendously. We had the records center operation here, had been in St. Louis since ... really since the end of the Second World War, starting with the Army records. But then when our previous building was constructed, the records of Naval personnel, Marines, Coast Guard, and Air Force all came into St. Louis. And at the same time in the early '50s, the records of the civil service came here. And those records were being accessed and referenced by the Federal Records Center here. But the main issue was, what was their ultimate—what was their ultimate fate? Would they, you know, eventually be destroyed or would they become part of the archives, permanent holdings of the National Archives?

And as I say, that's been happening starting in the mid-'90s, those appraisal efforts took place and the decisions were made, and since 2004 when the Archival Division was established here.

It's just, it's grown tremendously, and currently we have outside of—we are the largest facility in the National Archives outside of D.C., and our holdings come very close to ... well, I think our holdings exceed the holdings at A-1, and I think right now we have over, close, getting onto 700,000 cubic feet of archival records here. So it's a major, major center for the Archives. And as I say, the reference that takes place here is ... is I think second only to what takes place at the archives in College Park. And it's ...

Rebecca: What stories do you have from working at NARA?

Bill: Well. I guess the ones that I talked—told you before about bringing in these major series of records. And then, of course, we, I think we hold now upwards of over 800 individual series of records and over 130 record groups, so it's become just a major center for archival research.

In terms of stories ... well, it was in about two areas I remember working—but those involved, during the time that I was working in the Military Appraisal and Disposition Project, dealing with the collection of field command records here, we were assisted—a Congressionally mandated investigation of ... of extraterrestrial ... aircraft, basically? This was in the early '90s. A Congressman from New Mexico was ... basically ... directed the Secretary of Defense to have a major records search done on records created by the Air Force during the immediate postwar period in the late '40s and early '50s surrounding supposed sightings of unidentified flying objects. It was very interesting. The results of that—I think that study, they sent several teams of historians, Air Force historians out here to work, whom we worked with and helped ... access pertinent records that were held here in St. Louis. That went on for the better part of a year. The study they produced, I was looking at it the other day, it's about three inches thick [Laughing]. But the conclusions they came to were, obviously, that other events which at the time were top secret and could not be shared with the public ... because the information could not be shared, the result was that legends proliferated about what had occurred. The main place of course—I don't know if you're familiar with Roswell, New Mexico, is where one of the alleged crashes of a spaceship and supposed recovery of alien spaceship crew took place. All of that, of course, was ... crazy.

Rebecca: Mm-hmm.

Bill: But it had to be—because of this Congressman's insistence, the work had to be done to basically debunk [the legends] through the documentation that existed. So that was an interesting experience.

Another thing that happened somewhat later, there was an allegation of mass killings during World War II at an Army base in Mississippi. And I don't know, it was in the national news for quite a while in a place called Camp Van Dorn in Mississippi. It was alleged that the Army basically responded to a riot by African American troops by killing hundreds of them, and burying them secretly. And that also was a—again, the Secretary of Defense mandated an investigation, and they came out, the investigators were out with us for many months. And we were able to, based on tracing, using the unit records that we have here, the rosters and

morning reports, were able to identify the individuals who were assigned to the units that were there at Camp Van Dorn at the time of the alleged massacre, and we were able to follow these individuals through to the end of their military service and determined that there were not hundreds of people killed. I'm not sure that there were—I think there were one or two individuals who ... were shot in, during those riots and that died. But we were able [to determine], again, documenting through the records that the hundreds of people [who] were there and assigned at that base, at that time, not only didn't die, they were discharged alive from military service later in the war. So that also was an interesting research effort.

And there have been others. A number of investigations having to do with the use of mustard gas and Agent Orange by the services, and the exposure of military members to those ... toxic agents. Also, I was appointed to serve two different times as a Records Expert on committees of the National Academy of Sciences. The one [committee] was investigating the long-term effects of exposure to radiation, exposure of military service persons to radiation connected with the atmospheric nuclear tests that took place from 1945 or '46 through the 1960s. That was ... that committee worked for about, I think, two or three years. It involved numerous ... attending numerous meetings in Washington, D.C., at the National Academy of Sciences.

And then there was another committee that was appointed by the Academy to assess the effect of exposure to Agent Orange by persons who were in the military during the Vietnam War. It was essentially an epidemiological study, and the study obviously was founded on the use and the availability of the records of individual service members, as well as the records of military organizations, that we hold here in St. Louis. And, as I was an expert in those, you know, the contents of those records, I was asked to serve on those two committees at the National Academy of Sciences. So those were interesting experiences.

Rebecca: Do you have anything you would like to say about the Archives itself? Have you enjoyed working for it? Have you ... ?

Bill: Oh, tremendous. It's been—that's, you know, why I stayed as long as I have, because the work is fascinating, it's very rewarding. As someone who loves history and understands the importance of history, archives are the foundation of historical research. And without archives, history cannot be served. So it's been a wonderful, wonderful career. Wouldn't change it for anything.

Rebecca: Do you have anything else you want to add to your interview?

Bill: I don't think so. Can't think of anything at the moment.

Rebecca: Okay. Is there anything you need me to edit out of this interview at some point?

Bill: I don't think so, but I mean would I be able to listen to it? You know I—

Rebecca: [Interposing] Yeah, I can send it to you.

Bill: Yeah, and I can let you know. No, I don't think—I don't think so. I think I was accurate in what I said, but it would be nice to be able to listen to it and verify that.

Rebecca: Yes, sir, once the recording came out, we'll—I should be able to send it to you.

Bill: Okay. Great.

Rebecca: Just to let you know, nothing will be put online or released to anyone in the public for probably about five years.

Bill: Okay.

Rebecca: So you have plenty of time to make your edits if need be.

Bill: Okay. Great.

Rebecca: Alright, well thank you for letting me interview you for our Oral History Project.

Bill: Alrighty.

Rebecca: And thank you so much for talking to me.

Bill: Appreciate it. Good to talk. All right. Thank you.

Rebecca: Have a nice day.

[END RECORDING]



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ARCHIVES

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I authorize the National Archives History Office to use the recordings and transcripts in such a manner as may best serve the historical objectives of their oral history program unless restricted as noted below.

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