

U.S. NATIONAL ARCHIVES AND RECORDS ADMINISTRATION
Transcript of National Archives Office
Oral History Interview
Subject: Rod Ross
Interviewer: Rebecca Brenner
Date: July 30, 2015 and August 6, 2015

[PART I START RECORDING]

REBECCA BRENNER: This is Rebecca Brenner, an intern in the National Archives History Office, and I'm here at Archives I about to conduct an oral history of Rodney Ross. We are in room 400 in Archives I and today's date is July 30, 2015. Mr. Ross, could you please provide a brief overview of your background and education that led you to the National Archives?

ROD ROSS: Okay, I was born in Illinois in 1943. Two years later, my family moved to Batavia, Illinois, and I went through the entire public school system from kindergarten to senior year of high school; went to Knox College in Galesburg, Illinois for a Master's degree. Then on to the University of Chicago and left with, well, the Bachelor's degree was from Knox College, the Master's degree was from the University of Chicago. I left only with a Master's degree, taught at Wilberforce University, in Wilberforce Ohio, a black college, for two years. Went back to the University of Chicago, finished up everything except for the dissertation. Got married, my wife, Claire, and I moved to Washington, DC. I had a dissertation fellowship that first year, and then got a job with a Congressman elect, Tim L. Hall. I served as a legislative assistant, and during that time finished my PhD. Tim was not re-elected, and in September of 1977 I joined the staff for the Office of Presidential Libraries here in the National Archives Building.

REBECCA BRENNER: What was your PhD in?

ROD ROSS: American History.

REBECCA BRENNER: And what was your dissertation?

ROD ROSS: Dissertation was Black Americans and Haiti, Virgin Islands, Ethiopia, and Liberia, 1929-1936. Essentially, it was a seminar paper; it started as a seminar with Akira Iriye.

REBECCA BRENNER: [Interposing] That's so interesting.

ROD ROSS: And then became the all the discarded seminar paper topics, so John Hope Franklin was my real mentor at the University of Chicago. But Akira Iriye was the first reader and John the second.

REBECCA BRENNER: So what positions have you held here at the Archives?

ROD ROSS: For a while, I was moving seemingly every two or three years. And for the last 20 years, I've been in place, so I started out as an office gopher, a GS-6 in the Office of Presidential Libraries. After a year, got an appointment to the Nixon Presidential Materials project as an archivist, went through the training regimen there with the Center for Legislative Archives in terms of rotational assignments, spent time there with the Nixon project, especially listening to the Watergate tapes. Got a position and served for the last two years of Ronald Reagan's first term in a White House liaison office that the National Archives had. That office was on the verge of closing down, in part because of jurisdictional pursuits, and fortuitously I had gotten a job with a motion to GS-12 with the accession and disposal branch and the

Washington National Records Center in Suitland. So, I was there for about two years, and then I was basically recruited to the head of something called the Archives and Printed Archives Branch here at the National Archives that had Record Group 287 as its set of responsibilities, Publication of the U.S. Government. So, this was a set of materials that, in 1972, Bert Rhodes, the Archivist of the United States had reached a public printer to transfer what was sometimes called the Public Documents Library to the National Archives. Initially, Fred Coker from North Carolina was the supervisor for that collection. A few years later I took over, it turned out that I really wasn't a good fit to be a supervisor.

The opportunity came up to go to Center for Legislative Archives to work on the House guide that was being put together for the bicentennial of Congress, so I served with what later became, perhaps was already, the Center for Legislative Archives, went off for an archival fellowship for a month in Ann Arbor, came back, and by that time basically the collection had moved from Library and Printed Archives Branch to the Center for Legislative Archives, and I moved along with it and changed responsibilities from being a project head to being on the reference staff. So for a good long time, I've been here at the Center for Legislative Archives, probably from 1979 or so to the present.

REBECCA BRENNER: Wow, I'm definitely going to ask all of those things that you just mentioned, but first I want to know: when you first came to NARA, what training did you receive?

ROD ROSS: Now, when I first came I was a GS-6 technician in the Office of Presidential Libraries, and in some ways that was the high point of my career because, you know, I had my University of Chicago PhD; I wasn't treated as an office gopher but rather as a junior member of the staff and was rubbing shoulders with all the top people in the agency. So there was no formal training as the Archives technician, but once I started my work as an archivist, there was a formal training regimen, and with the Office of Presidential Libraries there were two key factors that possibly were somewhat unique for the agency. One was Dan Reed, the Assistant Archivist for Presidential Libraries, who had come from the Manuscripts Division at the Library of Congress, had arranged for archivists to gain exposure to the manuscript division, so I followed up Adrienne Thomas and doing an accretion to a collection of Franklin McVeigh papers.

McVeigh was a wholesale grocer in Chicago who served as Secretary of the Treasury during William Howard Taft's administration, and I found that collection fascinating in part because the stationery at the time for produce, canned goods, and all would often have two-thirds of the top of the page would be artwork and being some of a Streator, a professional Illinoisan, the fact that McVeigh was from Illinois was enriching for me. So there was that collection that I worked with, the other key thing that Dan Reed did was ensure that people with the Office of Presidential Libraries did training with Sara Jackson.

So, Sara was an African American who for the longest time did not have an archivist standing. When she first came here during World War II, she had, I think, the education but not the time and grade; by the time she had the time and grade, the education level had been upped and was only when one of the archivists basically said, "This is ridiculous; we have this person who's regularly being cited in publications as knowing more about military records as anyone else at the agency and she's not an archivist." So, Sara at the end of her career did become an archivist. She was a researcher for the National Historical Publications Records Commission.

REBECCA BRENNER: Would you say that these individuals served as mentors to you? And, if so, do you have any other mentors, too?

ROD ROSS: Well, Sara, definitely my key mentor at the National Archives, just as John Hope Franklin and Akira Iriye were in graduate school. Basically, the key people that I worked with in various places; Nadine Daniels, who's now the archivist at the National Gallery, was my direct supervisor when I was at the Office of Presidential Libraries. She was a mentor at various times in my career has interacted that of Trudy Peterson, who went on to serve as acting archivist of the United States.

Less a personal involvement with Trudy; definitely my opportunities to both be an unofficial historian for the National Archives as well as undertaking oral history projects was really because of Trudy. And then it really is various places I went. At the Record Center, people like Greg Bradsher were senior to what I was doing and gave me counsel. I've always really been in parts of the agency that were really being the periphery of the main focus of the National Archives mission—if one accepts basically civilian—archival custodianship of civilian records—the key focus of the agency. So first I was with the Office of Presidential Libraries, then I was with Printed Archives, that a lot of archivists look down on because they think if something's important it's the unprinted material, and now for the last twenty-something years I've been with the Center for Legislative Archives that as the legislative branch representative, is not in the mainstream for an executive agencies.

When I first joined the Center, Ed Shamel was the senior person working on the House guide, so I gained some knowledge from him. Ironically, Lewis Bellardo had come on board as head of the Center for Legislative Archives, and some minor things that I learned, one minor thing that I learned from Lew was writing box locations on boxes so that they could get back to the proper place, and there were people who've been less senior than me. Currently on the staff, Matt Fulghum, and Kris Wilhelm, Kate Mollan and others. I once held a senior position and now am learning from those who have less seniority that have developed expertise—

REBECCA BRENNER: [Interposing] Sounds like a real team player. But I was wondering—you mentioned your experience on the Hill in the legislative branch. How was that experience influences your expertise in the Center for Legislative Archives.

ROD ROSS: Well, I really feel, and the word is, blessed to have had the opportunity to be here at the National Archives, so I've been able to use my background in American history, my PhD from the University of Chicago, with my experience working in a members office during the 94th Congress, and sort of knowing from the inside how Congress operates, and basically the Center has committee records. So, no, I had been a liaison for Tim Hall for the Space Science and Astronautics Committee. And it's been rewarding seeing both sides.

As in terms of teaching, oddly, being an archivist also is a form a teaching, since working with researchers you need to help share how they can find information in the records that an archivist works with. So knowing something about government publications opens a wonderful set of opportunities for researchers, and the fact that Congress is involved with everything the Federal government is involved with is a kind of broad job, broad area for potential interests. In talking about mentors, oddly, the interchange with researchers also has been a rewarding experience for me, since I've learned from those researchers their particular topics, and it's been a two-way street in some of the researchers have become friends.

REBECCA BRENNER: You mentioned early on, I think you used the word “gopher” to describe a little bit of the culture of the reference room, and I was wondering if you could speak to your first impressions of the reference room when you started working there.

ROD ROSS: Well, I did not use the term regarding the reference room, I used the term regarding the office staff of the Office of Presidential Libraries, the main administrative area. So, no, I would not have thought to use the term for the records room.

REBECCA BRENNER: Okay. I was just trying to draw on something you had said, but could you speak to the culture of it when you first arrived, what were your first impressions of that part of the agency?

ROD ROSS: You mean the research room? I think my first impressions were when I was a graduate student on the other side and finding out that it just doesn't work giving your exact dissertation topic and ask to have the records brought to you. One needs to understand the organization aspects of the records if you have any hope of finding things. One thing that I've been impressed with in terms of past history for those who staff the research room is how some people have started there and went on to wonderful careers with the National Archives. Thinking of Sam Anthony with the Archivists Office and Rick Peuser in Archives II as two key examples of people who worked behind the desk, went and brought carts of material to researchers. It may be a low status position but it's certainly one of the major actions for individuals of this agency with at least a segment of the general public, mainly the researcher segment.

REBECCA BRENNER: What are some of the more interesting research topics that you've aided?

ROD ROSS: I haven't put together a listing of such, I think that probably not so much topics as people. So no, Mordecai Lee at the University of Wisconsin, Milwaukee does interesting things with agencies, in effect lobbying Congress, and how those public relations offices developed. I've been taken with a number of people who do research relating to antislavery petitions and I'm keenly interested in how the 14th Amendment came about and how it has effectively changed our nation. Sort of currently at this moment at 17 minutes after 3 in the research room is Kate Masur who has a book on basically African Americans in the District of Columbia and the move for political equality and then with the end of the home rule with the fall of Boss Shepard an end to that sense of political equality. Not only for blacks, but for whites in the District.

There is Claire Rodriguez who was working with census materials and basically minorities in 2000. I put together a panel for the Organization of American Historians, “Census Day 2000: Observations of Race in the Census.” And Claire was on that panel, as was a young fellow from France who had been dealing with the census, and since when I first came to the agency I had a special interest in Charles E. Hall, who was an African American who went and retired and was the highest ranking black in the Commerce Department. So, Charles Hall was born in my hometown of Batavia, Illinois and received his elementary education there. So people who have interacted with the census, I've provided them with my hall materials. So there's a fellow by the name of Eric Yellin who did a book on black civil service holders from the Civil War through the Wilson administration.

REBECCA BRENNER: What aspects of your work do you most enjoy?

ROD ROSS: The interchange with researchers.

REBECCA BRENNER: Yeah, I can tell. Can you describe a typical day in your unit?

ROD ROSS: Well, I do a major share of the email monitoring for requests that come in legislative.archives@nara.gov as well as meeting researchers. So, the staff of the Center for Legislative Archives is maybe 20 people or so with five or six basically doing two people a day on reference assistance to take telephone calls to work with walk-ins, so generally it's working on email requests, answering telephone requests, and working with researchers who come.

Oddly, the topics that I get the most interest in are often those that people would say, "What?" So these days I'm maybe two or three times a week I get requests for certified copies of House Joint Resolution 192, and basically Congress rennumbers the bills and resolutions with every new two-year Congress, so it took me a while that people were talking about House Joint Resolution 192 from the 73rd Congress that can be found in U.S. Statutes Large Volume 48, pages 112-113. That basically took the U.S. off the gold standard. So why people want certified copy of those two pages probably has something to do with payments, but I've never gotten a clear answer.

I answer probably the major share of prisoner letters and prisoners seem to have a keen interest in how HR 31-90 from the 80th Congress that re-codified Title XVIII of the U.S. Code got enacted. And now the 80th Congress is when Republicans came back into power in Congress, with the Republicans having a rocky relationship with Harry Truman, and Justice Kennedy once had a throwaway phrase about that particular statute being enacted in an odd fashion. A friend who works with the Congressional Research Service has assured me that by the time it left the Hill to go to the President for its signature all was kosher. But there are up teen people who would like to overturn the provision in the U.S. Code about Federal courts so that 60 years of convictions could be thrown out. There's documentation on how that law came about that a number of people are interested in.

REBECCA BRENNER: That's interesting. What would you say are the major successes of your time at NARA?

ROD ROSS: You know, in a minor, minor way, the fact that the legislative archives as a separate color code, not blue or not orange since when—

REBECCA BRENNER: [Interposing] But what do those colors mean?

ROD ROSS: Well, I think blue means east side, so when we were talking about the staff who man the research room, I think it's military records have blue and civilian records have orange so that the staff can readily tell which place to put the records are being pulled, and the Center was initially part of one or the other and I basically said, no, we should have our own color. So that's in a very, very minor way.

I have an article on using the Congressional Serial Set for the Study of Western History. And in effect that article is something that I pass out periodically to researchers, because if you can understand how the Serial Set can be used for the study of Western history you can understand how the serial set can be used for the study of any aspect of American history, and although in this current day and age, since it was written before computers became the widespread phenomena that they are today, knowing how to use the volume-finding aids was important, and oddly it's still important because, sure, you can Google terms, but if you don't know what the sum universe is of what there is out there, it's not as good as simply Googling to see what is out here.

REBECCA BRENNER: If you don't mind, that transitions perfectly into my next question, which is, Can you speak to technological changes over time?

ROD ROSS: The computer is clearly the main change. You know, I once remember hearing a discussion, Mel with somebody else. You know, Mel was head of diplomatic records and you know he basically said the day will come when everyone will have a computer on their desk, and somebody else thought that was outrageously fantastic thinking, whereas now the great majority of the people in the agency carry their own computer with them in the form of their telephone.

REBECCA BRENNER: And how does that influence your daily activities?

ROD ROSS: Increasingly, being able to find locations through the computer-based location guide becomes increasingly important, and being able to basically Google internal information about particular kinds of records to see what might show up really opens a whole new area. You know the whole notion of Googling is just so phenomenal that today somebody sent an email saying, "I'd like to have the transcripts of Senator Irvin's Watergate records, and so basically what he was asking for was the 25 or so books of printed hearings that the Irving committee in 1973 or '74 held and were published. The organization known as the HathiTrust has put all those volumes online, so it's incredible that I can send an email with a link to the HathiTrust site and say, "Here it is."

REBECCA BRENNER: More broadly speaking, what other changes have you experienced over time at NARA?

ROD ROSS: Well, I think partly in that same focus, there's an effort to do more with less so that subject experts, and to some extent I would classify myself as such, are increasingly less valued in the agency, because the focus is on everyone being their own archivist, online access, direct online access to archival materials, and given the sometimes arcane way that the records are organized, one really needs to understand the preliminary inventories. And George Scaboo was Robert Warner's deputy and his object was a kind of "have gun will travel" approach for archivists. There should be finding aids available for archivists and anyone should be able to use the finding aids. And that may work in theory, but it has limitations in practice.

REBECCA BRENNER: Can you evaluate the impact of the transition from more specialized experts to everyone being their own archivist?

ROD ROSS: Well, good and bad. Good in the sense that the technological revolution opens wonderful possibilities, and good in the sense that, if there's basically less money to do more, it's a way that, outwardly, work can be accomplished. I'm not alone in thinking about whether the quality of exchange suffers, but you can't have everything.

REBECCA BRENNER: Could you speak to your interactions with other Federal agencies through the National Archives?

ROD ROSS: I suppose. So, the main Federal entity that the Center for Legislative Archives interacts with is Congress, and I'm not directly involved with a lone program, so for Federal executive branch agencies. Those agencies sign legal documents with the National Archives transferring legal control of their materials to the National Archives—that never happens with House and Senate records. It just is House and Senate, Congress have exempted themselves from Freedom of Information Act and other Federal

provisions. Legal control of the House and Senate records remains with Congress and so we abide by the rules of access that Congress establishes, that the House and Senate establish for their records.

The office has a very active loan program so that we serve as a kind of warehouse for off-site storage of committee records, and very often will have requests for particular records returned. As I say, I mostly don't, am not very much involved, you know, occasionally take telephone requests if the proper person isn't around. We get requests from congressional offices about arcane matters, and sometimes they're within our bailiwick and sometimes they're really meant for the Congressional Affairs office.

Earlier in the week, there was a call from someone in the General Counsel's office with the National Guard and they were after a commission that looked into the Air Force, and this was a commission that went out of existence a year or so ago, and in their defunct website it says, "Contact the National Archives for follow-up," so I get this call because the report went to the Center for Legislative Archives.

So, one of the things that I generally do is take on the responsibility for myself if it's someone or something that the person has gotten bounced back hither and yon, to see where he needs to get to the right bounce. So I talked with a friend who works in the appraisal unit, got the name of the archivist who does appraisal work for the military; that fellow didn't have the answer but I was able to give him the telephone number so that the fellow in the National Guard can talk to somebody knowledgeable. My favorite story for a bounce around was just after the film Lincoln came out, and someone from—

REBECCA BRENNER: [Interposing] Was it like November 2012?

ROD ROSS: Was it that short time ago? So somebody from Mississippi had said, a friend of mine was saying that Mississippi never ratified the 13th Amendment, is that right? And it turns out that the Mississippi legislature in the 1980s, I believe, did ratify the 13th Amendment, but the paperwork never quite got finished, so I was able to put him in touch with the people at the National Archives and then he was able to get in touch with the Secretary of State's office in Mississippi, so Mississippi finally ratified officially for recognition permission is now ratified, the 13th amendment.

REBECCA BRENNER: That's amazing. So what challenges have you experienced doing the work that you do?

ROD ROSS: Well, one of the major challenges has to do with providing access, so oftentimes records needs to be screened for, so the Center routinely screens records not only to make sure the national security classifications aren't prematurely released but also the IRS is very, very sensitive about release of tax information, tax returns, and there are tax returns that are scattered throughout the records, so these need to be taken out, grand jury testimony is closed, sensitive information about individuals needs to have special scrutiny, so it's not just saying, okay, if a record is 50 years old it can be served.

So basically, the screening question is a major challenge, sometimes just trying to come up with the answer to what someone wants since there's some requests that are nearly impossible to work with somebody trying to enunciate clearly, I want everything on the Civil War. Or something equivalent, sort of, have I made myself clear? And the records sometimes aren't organized in the way that that one can find information without excruciating research.

REBECCA BRENNER: We're a little bit more than halfway through, so I want to go back to the specific projects that you mentioned early on when I asked you about what you had done at the National

Archives and before the National Archives. So first, could you speak to your involvement with the Richard Nixon project? Or papers?

ROD ROSS: Yeah. So, I grew up in the 1950s. I well remember the 1960 election that Richard Nixon lost, so basically Richard Nixon is not a distant historical figure but rather almost a contemporary, and I find it a little bit ironic that I've not only worked with the materials that were seized, the Presidential recording, the Nixon tapes were about to be returned to President Nixon and Congress stepped in and said, no, these will be seized by the Federal Government, so I worked with that collection, primarily with the tapes.

REBECCA BRENNER: When did you work with them?

ROD ROSS: If I started in 1977, this would probably be '78/'79, so the tapes went through several renderings of what could be released—primarily if it was personal information it was not; and if Nixon is speaking as head of the Republican party, is that a private consideration as opposed to his speaking as president of the United States? So, I find it a little bit ironic that I've ended up working with the White House materials as well as the Congressional materials that it involved the investigation so—

REBECCA BRENNER: [Interposing] What was it like to work with those tapes? What were they like?

ROD ROSS: It was exhilarating. About that same time the National Archives had listening stations that were set up in room 204 for public hearing of those tapes that had been played in general conversation, those court-related instances.

REBECCA BRENNER: Now are those tapes transferred to the Nixon library now or are they still here?

ROD ROSS: There is still a Nixon tapes project here, but the great bulk of the tapes have now been released to the general public, and I'm not sure whether they're downloadable audio, I'm not as knowledgeable as I should be for the access form of the great bulk of the recordings. One of the highlights of sorts, at least in meeting celebrities, was working ever so briefly with John Dean. You're too young to remember John Dean.

REBECCA BRENNER: I don't remember him, but I can picture him. I know who John Dean is.

ROD ROSS: Okay. So, I get this call one day, "This is John Dean." The John Dean. There was a lawsuit that he was involved with, furnished some records that he reviewed in the central search room. I remember a colleague basically coming just so that she could pretend to be doing something else just so that she could see who John Dean was. So, I'm not sure whether that answers your questions of working with Nixon-related materials.

REBECCA BRENNER: I guess I want to know more specifically about that transition from the Nixon tapes being government property and private to them becoming essentially public domain.

ROD ROSS: Well the legislation basically that seized the materials said that it would be the property of the Federal Government, so shortly, some years later, there was the Presidential Materials Act. So Presidential materials from George Washington until that Nixon episode were always considered the private property of the particular President, so the whole notion of Presidential Libraries comes from FDR saying, under the right circumstances, "I donate to people all of these records and things" and that was the beginning of the FDR library, of the Presidential Library system, as Truman was leaving the

White House. No, I guess it was as Eisenhower leaving the White House. There was legislation to set up an Office of Presidential Libraries, and it was thought there would be the Truman Library and there would be the Eisenhower Library, and then Herbert Hoover took advantage of the provision to have his Presidential library. So, the Nixon materials were here in Washington. Eventually the Federal Government, the National Archives, reached an agreement with the Nixon foundation that had a research facility and museum in southern California not terribly far from Disneyworld.

REBECCA BRENNER: [interposing] Disneyland.

ROD ROSS: Yeah, Disneyland. Actually, I visited it a couple of years ago with my younger sister and her husband, so basically that entity came under the domain of National Archives, although the Foundation and the Archives continued to have an unsteady relationship, so basically the tapes were seized and the Federal Government opened up the seized materials.

REBECCA BRENNER: Okay. You mentioned a jurisdiction dispute when you were a White House liaison during the Reagan administration. Can you explain what that was?

ROD ROSS: Well, that had two aspects. One, the National Archives had a responsibility to advise the White House what was what. But the White House wanted the National Archives office to report through the Office of Central Files, so it was sort of like having the chicken report to the fox in terms of how the chicken coop was being run. So the Archives wasn't happy with that, so then a fellow by the name of John Rodgers, who had an administrative position, wanted to have Federal agencies that had presence in the Old Executive Office Building start paying basically upkeep, and the Archives wasn't keen about that. And so basically the Archives said it was closing down its liaison office. It still had a presence relating to the receipt and packing transfer, temporary storage of gifts, especially out of state gifts that came to the president, but for a time period the office did close down.

REBECCA BRENNER: Okay. You also mentioned your work with the bicentennial project. What was that like?

ROD ROSS: That was an excellent chance for me to gain an understanding of the records of Congress. So I had as my responsibility, so there were two coffee table-like books that were guide that were put out. I authored chapters on the Foreign Affairs Committee of the House, and on the Space Science and Astronautics Committee. You know, having worked on the other side, on, I forget whether the District of Columbia Committee. So, I had a chance to write on things that I had a special interest in and I had a chance to go through the records and see how they were organized and give examples of key and interesting things in those records. So that was really an excellent overview for how the Center operated and what the Center did in terms of my education as an archivist with the Center for Legislative Archives.

REBECCA BRENNER: That leads perfectly into my next question, which I guess is sort of my main question, which is, Could you tell me about the beginning of the Center for Legislative Archives and how did it evolve over time?

ROD ROSS: See, I'm smiling when you say that, because I'm tempted to say the whole reason for the Center was to correct the gross inequality that the heads of Presidential Libraries would be a higher position than the person with responsibility for congressional records. So there was legislation that, and I'm blanking now whether this was simply a part of other legislation or whether it was a standalone

thing, but one of the things that by law got changed was the creation of the Center for Legislative Archives with somebody who had a grade level equivalent to Presidential Library Directors. When the Center was established, there was an Advisory Committee that was also established, and the *Advisory* Committee subsequently took on ongoing status, so the center really had evolved as a dynamic part of the National Archives, its education outreach program is first rate. The former Director of the Center, Mike Gillette, in some ways was responsible for the National Archives Foundation coming into being.

REBECCA BRENNER: How did that work?

ROD ROSS: Mike spent a lot of time on the telephone and he cultivated people, so I'm not the best of people to tell you how the National Archives Foundation came into existence. All I can say is, without Mike Gillette, it would not have evolved into what it did and probably not as rapidly as it did.

REBECCA BRENNER: Do you feel that you have made a significant contribution to the National Archives or to the historic preservation field? If so, what is it?

ROD ROSS: You know, I was gratified when a colleague last year had nominated me for a lifetime service award, the service award basically was inspiring a generation of archivists and with the mission of making access happen, and I really do think that I take a different spin on making access happen. So, oftentimes there'll be chance telephone calls and our office answers the phone, and there was once an instance where I was directing somebody to particular records that were at Archives II—but the records weren't really at Archives II they were in Kansas—and I put together a field trip to visit, a year or two years ago the Truman-Eisenhower libraries and I was going to be in Kansas so I half-volunteered to see what was what on a Saturday, but instead the archivist in Kansas was basically able to provide the law person in Atlanta with the information the law person was after. So I was thinking, yes, that really is an instance of making access happen. So, I've not really been involved with historic preservation, but I think I have been involved with fulfilling the mission of the agency to make the records available and meaningful to American people.

REBECCA BRENNER: How do you view your time overall at the National Archives?

ROD ROSS: I'm very glad that I've had the opportunity to have the career that I have had. As I said, it was the ability to use training in American history with interesting teaching and working with wonderfully intrinsic materials to have an enrichment for myself in terms of fulfillment of my potential, and I do believe in making a contribution both to the people that I've worked with and through them, through the greater community. So I realize you're close to ending, though ironically one of those fortuitous events involved the TV personality Cokie Roberts. So notwithstanding her position, she had simply come into the finding aids room to ask if an archivist with legislative records could come by to talk with her, and I was the one who ambled down—

REBECCA BRENNER: [Interposing] I love her books.

ROD ROSS: Well, subsequently I was able to put her in touch with other people, the Lincoln project, Kathy Jacob at Radford, Keith Melder, who had done a key paper on one of the women who she later used in her *Capital Dames*.

REBECCA BRENNER: Great book.

ROD ROSS: So, I was taken with her acknowledgment and taken with the acknowledgment of my sister-in-law's mother, who's a Holocaust survivor who in the preface to her self-published memoir, a promise kept other women in the concentration camp: one of us needs to survive to tell our story. So, in her introduction, in her acknowledgments, you know, Joyce Wagner credited me with doing the first oral history interview that she did in basically opening the floodgates in remembrance.

REBECCA BRENNER: You've mentioned a few, including that one, but I wanted to give you an opportunity to share any other interesting or useful anecdotes that may have not come up in my questions.

ROD ROSS: I think that since I don't have a list of anecdotes, undoubtedly after this tape is over I'll think, Oh yeah, there was the time that—

REBECCA BRENNER: [Interposing] You can always email me, and thank you for sharing the ones that you did. My last question is, what words of wisdom do you have from your time at NARA?

ROD ROSS: Seize the moment. Don't be afraid of saying the outrageous or thinking the outrageous because oftentimes the unconventional, I realize is cliché to say "thinking outside the box," is what gets people to have wonderful opportunities.

REBECCA BRENNER: Well, thank you again for your time. I'll turn off the recording.

[END PART I RECORDING]

[START PART II RECORDING]

REBECCA BRENNER: This is Rebecca Brenner from the National Archives History Office interviewing Rod Ross, part II. Today's date is August 6, 2015, and we are in room 400 at Archives I. So, could you speak to your involvement with the Oral History Project?

ROD ROSS: The Oral History Project, actually, we could either talk about my involvement with the National Archives leading up to the Oral History Project.

REBECCA BRENNER: Whichever starting point you think is best.

ROD ROSS: Yeah, it puts it in context. So, I was with the Nixon Presidential Materials project and I had the brilliant idea for an SAA session to have an update about where things stood. And it turns out that, as the GS-6 in the office, I really wasn't the appropriate person to speak and they already had that idea covered. But Trudy Peterson, who was on the program committee on the SAA that was going to have a program about founding fathers of the archival profession, basically came to me and said, "Oh, you were interested in doing something for a program. How would you like to do a paper on Ernst Posner?" And since I needed, I guess I was already in a kind of the equivalent of the CIDS program, you know the archival training program and I needed a paper, Maygene Daniels, who was my supervisor basically said, "Why don't we substitute the SAA paper that you'll do, or did, for the required archival paper?"

So back in 1981 I gave the SAA presentation and then it got published in the *American Archivist*. Then went on to do something on Leland and it too was published in the *American Archivist* and then a spinoff of that was a American Historical Association presentation that I gave that Bert Rhoads had organized on Waldo Gifford Leland and the preservation of documentary resources. So with those as background, I was asked to do an article for the 1984 issue of *Prologue* that was for the 50th anniversary

of the National Archives. And that *Prologue* article then was republished in a handout that the Archives gave away for a good number of years, *Guardian of Heritage*.

So, just as Trudy Peterson had been involved with my getting into the writing field, she had been an assistant to George Scaboo, Deputy Archivist under Robert Warner, and this was about the time, in the mid-1980s, that the National Archives was successful in getting legislative re-establishment of itself out of GSA as an independent agency. And basically the Archivist Robert Warner wanted to have oral history interviews done with those people with the National Archives that had been most active in the quest for independence, so there was a feature, an entry in the staff information bulletin, and oddly both Jessie Kratz and myself have searched in vain for what I definitely remember there in 1984, announcing that I would be head of National Archives oral history program, and that was how I learned about the program and my appointment.

So I was working at the Records Center in Suitland at the time and in effect I could have lots of time release, I could have lots of cassette tapes, and I was pretty much on my own. Since the discussion, the marching orders were, do basically the people on this list and retirees. And I expanded that just a little bit. So the first, who was a technician at the Washington National Records Center since I wanted to have something of an overview of the staff. Last week, when I signed the legal agreement giving rights for presumably this presentation as well as last week's, it was a form that I'd be interested in having tiny bit of a discussion on how you came up with the text of the form, because I came up with my own form for these close to oral history--

REBECCA BRENNER: General Counsel Chris Runkel came up with my form.

ROD ROSS: That's what I should have done also. Kudos to you.

REBECCA BRENNER: I didn't do that, Jessie did.

ROD ROSS: Well, kudos to Jessie, if it could have been well aware that I basically had moderated a form that Presidential Libraries used for oral history interviews. And I should have run it by the General Counsel's Office and did not. So my hat is off to you on that score.

REBECCA BRENNER: Actually, the only reason I know that is when I handed the form to Chris Runkel when I interviewed him, he said, "Oh, I made this."

ROD ROSS: Oh, so you think that Jessie asked him?

REBECCA BRENNER: Jessie sent me all the information that I needed. Maybe it was someone who asked him originally, I'm not sure, but it's that one in the oral history file in the Y drive. I just printed several of the form to use.

ROD ROSS: Excellent.

REBECCA BRENNER: When you signed it last week does it become public domain?

ROD ROSS: Right, so the way the current form is read, one really wants to be careful of what one says if one is a current employee. So of the people that I interviewed, oddly, there is a kind of relevance for today. You know, recently you may have heard also the Archivist of the U.S. at the last town hall meeting giving an update on what was what. And one of the what was what is it appears there will be yet another attempt to legislate out of existence the National Historical Publications and Records

Commission. And in doing one of the initial oral history interviews, it was with Charlene Bickford, who has a role as the with the First Federal Congress project as an editor. But she was one of the key people in the lobbying efforts to retain funding for NHPRC. So I'm not sure how much is her oral history interview, others who also similarly were influential.

Page Putnam Miller was one of the people that I interviewed who was the liaison for basically lobbying activities for the Society of American Archivists. So of the people that were on the list, Mary Ann Chaffee—so this is by memory so I might not have things exactly right. Mary Ann Chaffee, Stephen Daniels, Stanley Falk, Edward Gleiman, Page Putnam Miller, Marion Morris, Tom Persky, and Ira Shapiro.

And these were people who either worked in congressional offices as staff people or were agency historians, or in one way or another played a role for the National Archives independent movement. And basically the project sort of just petered out. You know, there were archivists like Gerry Haines who I interviewed, John Porter Bloom who I interviewed, but there was an immense number of former archivists or even current archivists that were on tap. You know, I expanded my purview to interview a fellow with IRS and a fellow with Justice Department because both had been prominent, not always in a complementary way, for the National Archives in the way the independent legislation got created.

REBECCA BRENNER: If I might ask, when you were managing the Oral History Project, what was your process of identifying people to interview?

ROD ROSS: Good question, and I don't have a good answer. So, there was the initial listing of people that were initial memo and then just using my own judgment. So one of the things that I did was grandfather into that collection an interview that I had done. My wife and I had been at Sara Dunlap Jackson's apartment and I done an interview with her two years earlier in 1982. So, basically I grandmothers that interview into the collection.

But in some ways my beginning with the National Archives was a high point in my career. Because I was basically the GS-6 office gopher in the Office of Presidential Libraries, and as such was rubbing shoulders with the top people in the agency, so I had some idea who the key people were. And just having an interest in history, there were people like Jimmy Walker, who was the key African American genealogist, and in effect the key genealogical expert for the National Archives; so I wanted to include him.

Harold Pinkett in the founding generation of archivists and the key African American Archivist of the initial years of the agency, so I wanted to include him and the opportunity came up to do a second follow-up interview to the one Phil Brooks Sr. had done with Bob Bahmer, the fourth Archivist of the United States. Bob Bahmer and Wayne Grover having brought on Bert Rhoads as basically their successor. And I interviewed Bert Rhoads the former Archivist, and that was the one that George Scaboo had said, "Oh, there's lots of unused secretarial help in the National Archives, getting transcriptions won't be any problem." And in point of fact his secretary did the transcription for the Bert Rhoads interview. But for the other ones, my hat is off to you, Rebecca—

REBECCA BRENNER: [Interposing] That's what interns are for.

ROD ROSS: For not only taking on this project but doing transcripts as well. So I was basically collecting cassette tapes, and cassette tapes sitting on the shelf are of little or no use, so I took advantage of two interns. And they created transcripts by disguise, so multipage basically summary what was spoken of so that one could basically follow in order, so then if one wanted to then hear the actual text basically to

make one's own transcript that at least became a doable project. So eventually I stopped and nobody seemed to notice, and that was the end of the project.

So if that seems like if my career at the National Archives if we're simply focusing, when we had a brief discussion. Yes, we will focus on that, we will not focus on my Black History Month presentations and arrangements with the Illinois State Society, other than those that were filmed by C-SPAN. And we won't talk about things like through the Illinois State Society putting on the program and the Lithuanian embassy after going on a Jewish heritage tour of sorts to Lithuania in 2012.

But rounding out the National Archives picture I came back to the Oral History Project in a sense. A year or two ago I had applied to membership in a club here in Washington, the Cosmos Club, and Meyer Fishbein in his late 90s was my second sponsor. So there was a kind of direct link that Ernst Posner had been Ira's sponsor and Ernst Posner, you know the esteemed German refugee that I had first done my publication on. It sort of all tied in together, so in re-listening to the Meyer Fishbein interview I arranged with Jessie Kratz to basically do a program at Archives II that became a National Archives YouTube, "[Meyer Fishbein Remembers](#)," so it was a very warm, not too many people in the main theater there of the National Archives but a very warm time for Meyer speaking to a whole new generation of archivists.

There are two other sort of National Archives-related things that in very, very recent years I've done. One was a 2013 *Prologue*, *Pieces of History* bit, "[Death Takes No Holiday: Full Military Honors at Arlington in 2014](#)." And that really highlighted the work of Bill Seibert, chief of archival operations at the National Archives in Saint Louis. A fellow in my building had died, Odis Quick, I learned about it in kind of a roundabout way and found that his body was still, months later, in an Arlington funeral home. And I ended up signing off on the papers for the cremation. And through Bill Seibert got paperwork that would allow burial in the columbarium at Arlington—

REBECCA BRENNER: [interposing] That's like straight off a West Wing episode.

ROD ROSS: Well, sometimes if only one person hears you, that's all you need. And the one person who heard me was Claire Kluskens, who's the genealogy expert here at the National Archives, and she took it really upon herself to locate the heirs of Odis Quick, and by golly she did. And, you know, so there were two sisters who were nieces of Odis Quick. One in Colorado, and one in California, plus there was a cousin of theirs who had converted to Islam and was living in Mali. So the two sisters here in the United States basically came to Washington. They took care of disposing of the apartment, the co-op apartment, and some months later they decided they were not going to opt for an Arlington Cemetery ceremony and instead quietly did a dispersal of ashes. So if anyone is curious to the follow-up that *Prologue* article, the Arlington Military Honors never came to be. So there was one more fairly recent sort of National Archives military-related thing I was associated with and that was being a YouTube for Memorial Day, Memorial, say 2015.

REBECCA BRENNER: Before we get to YouTube, there was one more publication I wanted to ask about, didn't you write something of use on congressional records for Western History?

ROD ROSS: Yes.

REBECCA BRENNER: Could you speak to that for a second?

ROD ROSS: Okay, so let's go back, because I wasn't sure whether we wanted continue, since I'd done a little bit of speaking at the last interview on my career with the Center for Legislative Archives. But I'm delighted you raised that topic, because I in fact at one time did want to talk about that. So if we talk about publications that I've been associated with at the Center for Legislative Archives; if we start out with the Guide to the Records to the House of Representatives, that the National Archives published, that guide in 1989 for the Bicentennial Congress, and then a companion work that Bob Coren was pretty much the sole editor and compiler for the Senate equivalent.

So I was working with the Library and Printed Archives Branch and decided I wanted to leave. I had talked to Trudy Peterson, who sort of serves as my guardian angel, while she ended up her career at the Archives as an Acting Archivist of the United States, and wrote a support letter for the Cosmos Club application for me.

So, I went to Trudy and basically said, I think I want out. And, by an odd coincidence, the day before somebody associated with the Center for Legislative Archives to-be, had told her that they needed more assistance for writing chapters for the House guide, so I went on initially a detail, I served as author for the chapters on the District of Columbia Committee, on the House Foreign Affairs Committee, on the Space Science and Astronautics Committee, and for the last committee I found it gratifying because during my two-year career as a legislative assistant, in the 94th Congress to a one term Democrat from Illinois, Tim L. Hall, I was his liaison for that committee, so I had a chance to sort of see things from both sides.

So my first publication of sorts with the National Archives relating to the Center was that guide. The second one was my publication in the Journal of Western History in the Serial Set "A Source for Western History," which was my excuse to explain what the serial set was and its wonders. So that I still continue to think of that as, if I'm going to cite one single publication, that would be the one that I would think would be the greatest contribution, period.

So there was a follow-up publication, so the Serial Set article was in 1994, the follow-up publication was in 1999 in the Journal of Government History, and that was basically a discussion of the Su-Docs. The Superintendent of Documents Library Classification System, since I had been working with Record Group 287, Publications of the U.S. Government, and then in 1988 that record group's responsibilities were folded into the newly created Center for Legislative Archives and I basically moved along with it.

So I moved from being on detail with the Center to going off for a month to Ann Arbor having a Bentley fellowship and having my topic on Early Administrative Histories in the Age of Computers that actually got published in India.

So when I came back, I was sort of now a part of the Center for Legislative Archives, and I switched from doing projects to basically reference, and that's been my career with the agency ever since. So knowing something about government publication was which was now a part of the responsibilities of the Center for Legislative Archives, I was happy to be available to do that article, it was an issue that I think Kris Wilhelm had an article in that same magazine on legislative materials relating to the creation of what eventually became the Department of Defense, and Richard McCauley, the historian with the Center, had something about the history of that movement.

So that particular article of mine looked at this two-year period between the demise of the War Department and the Navy Department before the creation of the Department of Defense that 1947-48 time period. There was something called the National Military Establishment, because it was a very small entity it was able to talk about the totality of the records, the publications that were associated with that Su-Docs class. So that largely is for publication at the Center. In 1992, I was part of OAH program on Indian-related records and basically talked about the things in the Serial Set as well as this marvelous collection from the mid-1920s; there was a Senate investigating committee that looked into the Indian question in the United States. And half of all Indian-related record the Center has a part of that collection of materials.

So the final thing I want to talk about relating to the Center responsibilities was I came up with a paper in 1994 for an Illinois history symposium on records relating to documents in the House and the Senate before the Civil War that highlighted the history of Illinois, and from that I ended up having this as a slide presentation, I ended up giving the slide presentation to the Illinois State Society. Went to a board meeting to explain what I would be doing, essentially never left.

So, much of the things I'm most proud of are actually activities I've done with the Illinois State Society. Which you had mentioned that for this interview we could talk about C-SPAN presentations, and I was especially prominent in putting together Black History Month presentations and I soon realized that there would be hardly anyone from the membership who would go to such things, that if I could basically put on presentations for other groups, it would be the other group's activity.

So one of the first such things with the National Archives volunteers, and there had been a *Prologue* article on Ida B. Wells Barnett, who had ended up her career in Illinois, so basically had the *Prologue* author speak about Ida Wells Barnett and had that open to the Illinois State Society. Then I hit into doing things with the U.S. Capitol Historical Society and especially Matt Wasniewski as House Historian.

So, one of the C-SPAN programs that's filmed is my giving an introduction to a historian in the office, Laura Turner O'Hara, in February 2011. That was her talk on Senator Hiram Revels, who had an Illinois education, he went to a kind of preparatory school associated with my college, Knox College, in Galesburg. And then a year later there was a program that I put on John Willis Menard, who had he been seated would have been the first African American in Congress. And Philip Magnus talked about his early career, especially going to Belize and then—you look like you don't want me to finish.

REBECCA BRENNER: I'm really interested, but it just occurred to me that I'm not on topic. So, if I could ask you to move on to the Memorial Day Video.

ROD ROSS: Okay, let me just finish John Willis Menard and say for that C-SPAN program. So there are three things that if you Google C-SPAN and Rodney A. Ross come up, I end up reciting a love poem as a kind of transition between the two persons by Menard. So moving on to the Memorial Day program, which really fits in with this interview series, because Jessie Kratz, the Historian, had talked about doing an oral history interview with me.

REBECCA BRENNER: And from what I've heard when you interviewed with her originally you talked about what you were going to do for the Memorial Day project, so if I could ask you what you did for the Memorial Day project?

ROD ROSS: Well, again, this becomes interesting. So basically, instead of doing the oral history interview, she had arranged for John Heyn, H-E-Y-N, to tape the presentation and she had agreed to let me basically redo, recreate the 1978 text of a talk I gave in my hometown in Batavia on men from Company B of the 124th volunteer regiment and their service in the Civil War, largely using records and especially with guidance from Mike Musick, who was the Civil War expert at one time here in the agency. So it was 18 minutes, it was not terrible, but it was not anything for appropriate for a YouTube presentation, and subsequently John Heyn and I both spent a whole lot of time. Both my re-working the text, my liaison Amy, with the curator at the Batavia Depot Museum for photos from Batavia and the YouTube that we finally, finally ended up with was something entitled "[Memorial Day 2015: Why it Matters.](#)" So it started out with the presentation that I had written for the Archivist, introducing me, indicating that I would highlight one National Archives record, if you Google me, Rod Ross Memorial Day, it's easy to find the YouTube.

REBECCA BRENNER: I've watched it.

ROD ROSS: And one thing that John wanted to do was do it outside by the G.A.R. monument that is kitty-corner from the National Archives Building. And eventually there was a wonderful spring day, the magnolias were in bloom, we did it outside at noon-time filming. And I'm very, very happy with the result. Since it basically did tie in with my things with the Illinois State Society, since one of the key things I've done with the Illinois State Society is not only bring about a remembrance of John Willis Menard but especially one of the most prominent Americans of the late 19th century, John A. "Black Jack" Logan. So if you listen to one of the verses of the Illinois State Song, it refers to Grant and Logan and Lincoln. So, Logan's key credit is as commander of the Grand Army of the Republic he issued to the general order establishing the end of May for what became Memorial Day, Decorations Day.

REBECCA BRENNER: So what exactly was that document that you used?

ROD ROSS: The document was a record from the compiled service order—

REBECCA BRENNER: [interposing] What's that?

ROD ROSS: So, in terms of military paperwork, especially in this case, Civil War military paperwork, there were hundreds of thousands of soldiers, North and South, in the Civil War, if not millions. I'm not sure whether it would have been the Adjutant General's Office established a way of grouping together paperwork on individuals, and there was one fellow from Company B of the 124th Illinois Volunteer Regiment who was killed at the time of the siege of Vicksburg.

So, basically I got the page that had his name and then killed Vicksburg and the date in 1863 and that was the document, was the featured document. So it was sort of like, yes—and there was a picture of the Civil War Monument in Batavia something dedicated in 1918. It had his name. So I don't have a picture of him and I don't have his signature, but it was like bringing an unknown soldier to life.

So yes, and part of the tie-in was the Memorial Day observance, and ended up quoted part of that general order that relates to it being incumbent upon comrades to honor their fallen comrades. "Their soldier lives were a reveille of freedom to a race in chains and their deaths a tattoo of rebellious tyranny in arms." I found it dramatic and I ended my presentation with that dramatic reading.

REBECCA BRENNER: Are there any other presentations that you want to highlight that you've done that are telling of the National Archives as an agency?

ROD ROSS: Okay, there's one more that relates to workings of the National Archives, sort of, and that was a presentation last June, a year ago, June 24, 2014. That was a presentation of the Afro-American History Society and that was in Archives II and it was filmed by the society, so it's not a National Archives YouTube, but it has been filmed. A close friend of mine, a neighbor, is Dr. Ezra Naughton, who was born in St. Croix, and his talk entitled "The 1848 Emancipation of a Slave Population: US Virgin Islands as a Mirror on America."

So it was a National Archives group that hosted that presentation, you know the National Archives does have a record group for the Virgin Islands, and so I think that counts. There have been a couple of times that I've done introductions of speakers, there was one twice this year, as a matter of fact. William Marvel had a talk here in the theater, "Lincoln's Autocrat: The Life of Edwin Stanton," and then last month in July, Anthony Pitch talked about his book, *Our Crimes were being Jewish*.

REBECCA BRENNER: I went to that.

ROD ROSS: So, you heard me?

REBECCA BRENNER: And I've read it.

ROD ROSS: So, I've known Tony Pitch for a number of years, and I'd once told him that I wouldn't be able to go to a presentation he was giving because I had put together a field trip for myself to go to the Eisenhower and Truman libraries, which I did. Because I had arranged for my sister-in-law's mother, Joyce Wagner, to speak at the Eisenhower Library on her self-published memoir: "A Promise Kept." So as a Holocaust survivor, survived two years in Auschwitz, she ended up in her book quoting General Eisenhower and his becoming overwhelmed with emotions on seeing those survivors and those who did not survive the death camps, and the ones the Americans liberated were not really the death factories that Auschwitz and other places were.

REBECCA BRENNER: Did you help Anthony Pitch with finding documents here?

ROD ROSS: I was instrumental in his using some quotes from Joyce Wagner. The first time I worked with him was on his War of 1812 book. And for that there was, I think, a House of Representatives investigation into the war and I had provided those to him. So that was the beginning of my assistance to him. I did not work with him on his second major book, that of, *They Killed Poppa Dead* on the Lincoln assassination.

REBECCA BRENNER: I'll end with the same question I ended the last interview. Are there any other anecdotes or words of wisdom that you want to share before we conclude?

ROD ROSS: Well, I appreciate having the chance to do this follow-up interview. And I guess there is, if I'm talking about oral history interviews, there was one that doesn't count that I'd done for a labor oral history interview project at Roosevelt University in the early '70s with one of father's first cousins who left Zarsas, Lithuania in the same emigration group as my paternal grandfather, which does sort of tie into a National Archives record, because subsequently I found the passenger manifest for that emigration group and it's interesting that none of the names jived.

So my last name is Ross, and by the time of the 1910 census my male relatives and my direct ancestors were using the name Ross. But the passenger manifest gives the name as Resch, R-E-S-C-H. Now, my grandfather was Louis, he's listed as Laib on the manifest. It helps bring to life an individual story of the story of America. So I was happy with that effort when I worked with the two years in what was a proto-Ronald Reagan Presidential Library's office, last two years of Reagan's first term, I did a number of oral history interviews with staff members that are findables there at the Ronald Reagan Presidential Library. So rather than talk about other aspects of my life, I will close and thank you very much.

REBECCA BRENNER: Thank you very much.

[END PART II RECORDING]



NATIONAL ARCHIVES

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DEED OF GIFT TO THE PUBLIC DOMAIN

I, Rodney A. Ross, do hereby give to the National Archives History Office the recordings and transcripts of my interviews conducted on July 30, 2015.

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.

In making this gift I voluntarily convey ownership of the recording and transcripts to the public domain.

<u>Rebecca Brenner, Intern, History Office</u>	<u>Rodney A. Ross</u>
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