

National Archives Oral History Interview

Subject: Dorothy Hill Gersack

Interviewer: Kathryn Murphy

Date: November 23, 1982

Transcribed by Rod Ross

Kathryn Murphy: I'm pleased to present Mrs. Dorothy Jeanne Hill Gersack, formerly of the National Archives, who will answer some interesting questions we have for her. When did you start working at the National Archives?

Gersack: I started work at the National Archives on Monday, November 2, 1936, and I retired on July 31, 1975.

Murphy: What was your educational background and interests, and how did you happen to choose a career at the National Archives.

Gersack: Well, I have a Bachelor of Science in Education with majors in English and History, and I have a Bachelor and Master degree in Library Science—all from the University of Illinois. There was a notice of a job available as a cataloger of manuscripts in the National Archives posted on the bulletin board of the cataloging division of the library at the University of Illinois library. I was interviewed informally by John R. Russell, head of the National Archives Division of Cataloging for Manuscripts at the luncheon during the ALA meeting in June of 1936 in Richmond, Virginia. I had been recommended to him by a mutual friend at the Enoch Pratt Library in Baltimore. He requested that I send in an application which I did. In October I was informed that I was hired and to report at my earliest convenience.

Murphy: What was the proportion of women on the staff in the early days? Was there any change in the proportion while you were on the staff?

Gersack: The proportion of women employed at the National Archives was fairly small except in the Cataloging Division where I was the ninth appointee, joining such others as Josephine Cobb, Helen Beach, Bess Glenn, Evangeline Thurber, and Clarissa Goold.

Murphy: Did you qualify for more than one job?

Gersack: Wait a minute—erase. Before I left the National Archives the proportion of women had increased. I applied only for the job of librarian "archivist." Generally speaking women

were more favorably considered for librarian assignments and men for archivists. Qualification for archivist in the early days was regarded as graduate degrees in the field of history and social sciences.

Murphy: After being hired, did you do library work or archives work?

Gersack: All archives work. I even began helping to index the motion picture films that we were beginning to bring in from the different government agencies.

Murphy: In those early days how were promotions handled? Were there ladder positions by which you could advance to higher grades or did you have to change positions to get more salary and how often was it possible to get a promotion? Were promotions equitably divided between men and women?

Gersack: Promotions were usually handled through political pressures and endorsements. Advancements purely on merit were very rare and almost unknown as one went up the ladder. Usually there were at least six months before you could get promoted.

Murphy: How was the Archives organized when you came and where did you work? What were your duties? Who did you work with? And would you describe memorable coworkers and researchers?

Gersack: Well, the Archives were organized by type of record and agency of origin. That is, Motion Pictures, Still Pictures, records of Departments of State, Commerce, and so forth. When I arrived at the Archives there were virtually no records accessioned within the building. I went out to agencies, surveyed records, planned accessions, and disposals. I worked for 25 years with court records and 15 years with veterans records. I found coworkers Meyer Fishbein and Kenneth Munden to be not only outstanding, competent, but very sympathetic and active in their recognition of women. I worked with some outstanding researchers such as Irwin Rhodes, the retired editor of the University of Oklahoma Press. The primary mission of the National Archives had been to preserve only the most valuable records and to ascertain and eliminate the not valuable ones.

Murphy: Were there any management positions held by women and what were they? And were their contributions recognized by their male colleagues?

Gersack: Only a few management positions were held by women in the beginning. The general files under Virginia Wolfe, the stenographic pool under Caroline Covington, the Central Research Room by Edna Vosper were the main ones. No, they made little or no impact on the agency and they were not taken seriously by their male colleagues.

Murphy: Did you feel or were there any feelings generally among women employees that opportunities for advancement were limited? If there was such a feeling, how was it manifested? By complaints to supervisors only? By memos to the brass? Mass meetings? What was the official reaction, if any?

Gersack: Yes, women employees felt that their opportunities for advancement were severely limited and they frequently voiced their dissatisfaction although there were no demonstrations or mass meetings in those years or for a number of years thereafter. Officially women were considered at best adequate.

Murphy: What efforts were made to reclassify and upgrade jobs with the Civil Service Commission for archivists, archives assistants, or sub professionals?

Gersack: The first general upgrading of archivist jobs came as a result of a study made by the newly organized AFGE union lodge at the National Archives in which it was observed that the archivists at the National Archives were the lowest paid of all the U.S. government agencies and especially the staff was required to possess high educational achievement. No women in management were particularly active in assisting other women to progress. Women have not been noted historically for helping each other and this was also true among onboard female personnel in the National Archives. The main influence in achieving more equitable treatment of women in the areas of promotions and assignments here came through both the civil rights movement and the influence of the AFGE union. Men with professionally successful lives have not shown any particular interest in promoting the achievements of women.

Murphy: Would you kindly comment on significant events and their effect on the National Archives.

Gersack: Well, during the Depression there were numerous applicants who were highly qualified for all jobs in the Archives. During World War II many women replaced men but only on a temporary basis, relinquishing such jobs to men who returned either from one of the military services or from one of the wartime agencies. Records transfer and disposal plans had to be expedited to meet the needs created by the enormous volume of records newly

created by the war agencies. Microfilming became increasingly recognized as a technique for making records more easily available, increasing the security of such records and solving space problems. It was opposed by many of the old school such as Dr. Roscoe Hill who regretted the eye strain he experienced by using microfilm. The 1950 change to GSA simply meant that we were in competition with managers for direction of policies. Establishment of Record Centers was dictated by the increased space problems and the desire to bring the records into closer contact with field agencies and users of the records throughout the country.

Presidential Libraries began with the Franklin D. Roosevelt Library, which began in his lifetime. Followed by others—those for Truman, Hoover, Eisenhower, Kennedy, and so forth. The policy of maintaining Presidential Libraries remains a controversial one. It is unlikely that independence would benefit the National Archives by separating it from GSA. As an independent agency it experienced many of the same problems now and is still causing criticism. Records declassification policies have traditionally been the special responsibility of the agency of origin.

Murphy: Would you care to comment on employee organizations and life as a government employee generally?

Gersack: The National Archives has not encouraged membership in professional organizations as it should. Both the National Archives Association and the *Archivists* have always been management communication tools and had little or no significance or impact on the staff generally. I served eight years as the *News Notes* editor for the *American Archivist*. Interestingly enough the union in the National Archives was founded by a women staff member, you, Kathryn, yourself, who has done much to achieve objective and fair treatment for women employees as well as other staff members.

Commuting distances have grown as the social and economic pattern of life in the Washington, DC area has changed. Yes, cohesiveness of staff member organizations has suffered and been almost destroyed because staff live such great distances apart. Many issues and problems encountered by working mothers remain the same. The availability of affordable childcare continues to plague the working mother as much as ever and she has to work for lower wages. No, the civil rights and women's movement have not had the impact in the National Archives that they have in other agencies. The bottom line is in the National Archives it is and has always been "administrative discretion." Thank you.

Murphy: Well, thank you so very much Dorothy. This is Kathryn Murphy of the staff at the National Archives. We've enjoyed making this interview with you and we know that it will be invaluable in our oral history program. Thank you again Dorothy for your very interesting comments.

Gersack: You are welcome.

Murphy: Dorothy, I believe you do have one or two postscripts that you would like to add and this seems to be the time.

Gersack: Yes, I have a couple of things. One is that I have always felt that the Archives failed to train the staff in how to do reference service on manuscript records in the National Archives. And another is to explain when we changed from card cataloging series by series of records brought into the National Archives was in the period of time when speed reading came in and the college professors liked to be able to sweep their eye down the page and pick up the items they were interested in without having to go card through card in the card catalog as I know most of us have had to do in our research.

Murphy: Well, thanks again Dorothy. I know you've made some helpful suggestions both in the body of your interview and in your postscript. And thanks again.

Gersack: All right.

Murphy: This interview was made at the home of Mrs. Gersack's daughter on November 23, 1983, in Ellicott City, Maryland. 1982, pardon me [laughter] we are rushing the season.

Gersack: We sure are.