

A Conversation with David Langbart

David Langbart and Richard Immerman

In response to a proposal by then-SHAFR President Kristin Hoganson and Julia Irwin and Gretchen Heefner, the program chairs for the 2020 meeting, David A. Langbart (DAL) agreed to hold an informal conversation with Richard H. Immerman (RHI) at a luncheon plenary. Alas, the Covid-19 pandemic forced the cancellation of the 2020 meeting, and with it the cancellation of this conversation. Serendipitously, however, in 2021 David received the inaugural Anna K. Nelson Prize for Archival Excellence. This year's program chairs, Ryan Irwin and Megan Black, appropriately requested that in conjunction with his receipt of the Nelson Prize David agree to an interview with Immerman along the lines of their intended conversation last year. What follows, then, is David's responses to questions posed by Immerman.

All opinions expressed in the answers to the following questions reflect those of the respondent and do not necessarily reflect those of any agency of the U.S. Government.

RHI: As a point of departure for our conversation, why don't you tell us a little about your career, which has encompassed both appraisal and research services. I'm particularly interested in how your training, especially but not limited to your undergraduate study with Walt LaFeber at Cornell, prepared you for your work at the archives, and beyond that, how you would characterize your "on-the-job training."

DAL: I began work at the National Archives as a Federal Summer Intern while still in college more than four decades ago. I was a history major and immediately became enthralled with working with the records and changed my career aims to archival work. I started out in the Legislative, Judicial and Fiscal Branch as a part-time employee. I became full-time when I joined the Diplomatic Branch after graduation and then moved to the Military Field Branch. In all of those jobs I performed the primary archival functions of arrangement, description, and reference. As a result of working in different branches, I became familiar with the records of many different agencies and the wide variety of recordkeeping. I spent the middle twenty-plus years of my career in the area of archival appraisal, working on the disposition and scheduling of records, which I'll discuss further in response to your later question. I had responsibility for a variety of agencies but spent most of my time working with the agencies in the foreign affairs community, in the Executive Office of the President that create federal records, and with the national-level intelligence agencies. A bit more than a decade ago, I moved back to working directly with records, again undertaking arrangement, description, and reference activities. In there, I also went back to school and earned my master's degree.

Based on my experience, the best training to be an archivist

is in some field that requires retrospective documentary research as a fundamental part of professional preparation. I think training to be an historian is the absolute best route. In order to understand the records with which one deals and to understand the work processes and assist researchers, you have to know the topic as well as the history and organization of specific agencies and what researchers are trying to accomplish and have at least some practice in using records. Almost all the technical aspects involved in the work are easily be learned on the job, but understanding the historical perspective takes more in-depth training.

Besides giving me a great grounding in the history and variety of issues involved in American foreign policy, the most important thing Walt [LaFeber] and political historian Joel Silbey did was to impress upon me the importance of archives, archival work, and knowledgeable archivists to the success of historians and others who use the records.

RHI: Following up on the above, can you provide us with some insight on some of your "less conventional" assignments or your appraisal work on the records of various intelligence agencies and the records of foreign affairs agencies throughout the Cold War. What did this work entail?

DAL: I have had the privilege of working with some very important records and undertaking many interesting and exciting assignments over the years. At the risk of boring you with a long list, here are some that I remember fondly: providing special support to the House Assassination Committee investigating the assassination of President John F. Kennedy; locating truly unique and unknown Department of State records relating to Marcus Garvey; handling the paperwork and other actions necessary to accession the Charter of the United Nations; processing the large volume of intermingled records of the World War II China-Burma-India, India-Burma, and China Theaters of operations; travelling to Berlin to locate, identify, appraise, and schedule the records of all elements of the unique U.S. Mission Berlin covering the period from 1945 to 1990; ferreting out the unappreciated and unscheduled records of USIA; scheduling the records of the Department of State's principal officers; leading the appraisal team that scheduled the Department of State's electronic Central Foreign Policy File; handling the complex and sensitive reappraisal of CIA Operational Activity records; appraising the National Security Agency records relating to the VENONA project; appraising, scheduling, arranging, and describing the CIA's records of the early 1950s operations in Guatemala; appraising the records of the September 11 Commission; serving on the team NARA contributed to the extensive interagency effort to schedule and appraise the records of the National Reconnaissance Office when that agency

was publicly acknowledged after more than 30 years of existence as a covert special access program; serving on the working group carrying out a detailed review and appraisal of complex Federal Bureau of Investigation files; and contributing diverse posts to the Text Message Blog (<https://text-message.blogs.archives.gov/>).

This is but a small sample of the variety of projects I have worked on. Others, of an administrative nature, were important to the mission of NARA but of less interest to members of SHAFR. To all of that work, I always brought the perspective of the historian and the potential user of the records. Given the agencies and records with which I worked, the interests of SHAFR members were paramount.

RHI: In the some 4 decades that you've worked at NARA, what would you identify as the most significant, or perhaps fundamental changes that you've observed from the perspective of the researcher's experience? Or put slightly differently, what have been the pivotal changes within NARA, and how have they affected researchers visiting NARA?

DAL: The biggest change is that the National Archives and Records Administration became an independent agency in April 1985. Despite a more than doubling of the size of the holdings, the addition of several presidential libraries, and the creation of the necessary overhead staff for an independent agency, however, NARA's staff level is almost exactly the same as when it became independent. Major changes include a huge increase in the volume of records; increased complexity in the records; increased access restrictions on the records; a transition from paper records to electronic records with all the attendant problems that have yet to be identified or figured out; a decrease in the number of staff working directly with the records to process and describe them and to provide reference service on them; a decrease in the overall knowledge of the staff about the records and the almost total lack of persons with deep knowledge of the records and associated academic fields.

Associated with the last point is a growing reliance on automated tools to replace human knowledge just as the records are getting overly complex. While automation has its strengths, it cannot replace the human element. It only tells you if something that exactly matches your search is there; it won't help you find what you do not know to ask for. Automated tools are great when looking for the specific name or title, but terrible for concepts or the general subject search. This is where the human element comes to the fore. They also make it very difficult to undertake general searches of the finding aids, thus inhibiting the serendipitous discovery of relevant records that might otherwise escape attention. With the overall decline in staff knowledge of the records, however, the result is that researchers are almost forced to be self-reliant when it comes to locating records. Sadly, that message may have percolated out to the point that they do not take advantage of the expertise that still exists.

RHI: Over the years members of SHAFR have benefited immeasurably from the advice you have provided on the NARA website, at SHAFR meetings, and in person (and less directly through your briefings at HAC meetings). What are the key "mistakes" that researchers make that cause you the most frustration?

DAL: The worst thing a researcher can do is show up without making advance contact or taking advantage of the information that is available on line, such as the extensive pages beginning at <https://www.archives.gov/research/>

foreign-policy and then following up to ask questions or clarify matters before arriving. Once they arrive, they do not take the time to step back, check out the lay of the land, and then develop a research plan; they just jump in and many seem to flail about. They also fail to establish a rapport with the knowledgeable archivists; getting oriented in the records is not a one-conversation deal. To help researchers, the National Archives has produced useful guidance that addresses this question in some detail. See: www.archives.gov/research/start/research-visit-faqs.html. How reference and use of the records is going to change in the wake of the COVID pandemic is still an open question.

RHI: SHAFR members are understandably notorious for filing FOIA requests. Indeed, if anything the volume of requests has increased as NARA has fallen farther behind the mandated schedules for releasing documents. How have these FOIA requests affected records management?

DAL: As an archivist working with Federal records, I have a mixed view of the Freedom of Information Act. On the one hand, it is a major tool used by many researchers to secure the release of important documents that have helped reveal and explicate the actions of the U.S. Government, and as you note to get records open. On the other hand, I have seen the results of the handling of records by agencies as they process FOIA requests. Let us say that the concern with the preservation of the records is not always evident. Based on the number of charge-out cards (not withdrawal notices) in the files, there are thousands of pages of documents that were charged out from the files for FOIA purposes and never returned to their proper places. And then there are the occasions where the files are just gone with no explanation. I have also seen instances where redactions were made on the original documents.

And finally, the piecemeal declassification of individual documents under FOIA is no substitute for the systematic declassification and opening of entire series of records so researchers can make their own determinations about which documents are relevant to their research and experience the joy of serendipitous discovery as they wend their way through the files.

RHI: Recently, and by this I mean only within the last 3 or 4 years, SHAFR members have become more aware of the salience of records disposition schedules. This in part has to do with the organization's involvement in a law suit concerning the ICE records schedules. Can you succinctly define a records disposition schedule, describe how they are formulated and approved, and explain the problems they can present.

DAL: Records disposition schedules or records control schedules, they are both the same thing, are the tool through which the Archivist of the United States carries out the mandate to designate which records are to be preserved in the National Archives and which records should be destroyed. Few people realize that the Archivist of the United States is the only person who can authorize the destruction of Federal records (with a couple of exceptions), and the schedule is how that is done. The development of schedules is an interagency process in which agencies identify all their records and propose dispositions for them. The National Archives and Records Administration then reviews those schedules, appraises the records, requires revisions if necessary, and once NARA and the agency in question reach agreement, the result is signed by the Archivist. There is also a process whereby members of the public may comment on any schedule that includes records proposed as temporary or reduces the retention period for records previously designated as temporary.

Under an earlier model of scheduling, the approved schedules had sufficient detail so they could serve as a sort of guide to records in the custody of agencies and then serve as initial descriptions of the records transferred to the National Archives. The current model is very different. The descriptions of the records are so broad that they can serve neither of those important functions. They also leave a lot to be desired from other perspectives.

RHI: Looking to the future, what impact do you estimate that NARA's transition to electronic records will have on records management, on the one hand, and how historians of US foreign relations will conduct their research, on the other?

DAL: The answer to this question goes far beyond the foreign relations researcher; it applies to everybody who uses the records in the National Archives. I've touched on some of the problems above, but the issue is much larger. There are questions about infrastructure, management of electronic records both in the agencies and at the National Archives, and how the electronic format affects declassification and review for other types of restrictions, among others. Certainly, researchers will have to deal with a more amorphous body of materials rather than the organized papers files with which they are familiar and rely on automated tools to find documents of interest. Whether there will be enough context in which to understand those isolated hits is an open question. One need only consider the documents available on agency FOIA websites; there is a lot of interesting stuff there, but what it means is not clear without the context provided by surrounding documents which may be difficult to find in the automated world. Some argue that the electronic format will allow other types of analysis and open up new vistas; I am sure some of that is true, but old vistas will be closed off to the detriment of all.