



ADMINISTRATIVE HISTORY
OF THE
NATIONAL PERSONNEL RECORDS CENTER

NATIONAL PERSONNEL RECORDS CENTER
NATIONAL ARCHIVES AND RECORDS SERVICE
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PREPARED

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INTRODUCTION

The National Personnel Records Center (NPRC) is located in the greater St. Louis metropolitan area. It consists of two separate buildings located approximately twelve miles apart. The Winnebago Street building has been, for many years, the federal government's depository for the records of its former civilian employees. The building located at Page Boulevard houses largely the records of separated military personnel. Throughout the years the holdings at both buildings have been supplemented by various other government records, particularly at the Winnebago facility.

NPRC holds a unique position within the National Archives and Records Service (NARS) system. A product of earlier times and events, it evolved from a series of scattered holding areas, temporary quarters, and records centers to become a truly national organization, as well as the largest field activity in NARS. Responsible for the accessioning, maintenance, and disposal of these records, this Center also provides an important reference service for the public. Despite numerous changes, reorganizations, and the increased complexity of work, the continuing mission of NPRC is "to provide service to those who have served."

ADMINISTRATIVE HISTORY OF NPRC

BACKGROUND

The need for storage or archival facilities became apparent during the post Civil War decades. Total accumulated cubic feet of federal records had surpassed the one million mark. This growth, combined with the absence of a central storage area and uniform regulations, courted disaster. According to the First Annual Report of the Archivist of the United States, 1934-35, an estimated 250 fires occurred in government buildings in Washington, DC between 1873 and 1915.¹

This situation led to an investigation into the conditions of the records and eventual legislative action. President Rutherford B. Hayes, following the advice of a commission report, recommended that Congress appropriate \$200,000 for the construction of a cheap, fire-proof building as a hall of records.² A bill authorizing such a building had been introduced but failed to pass both Houses of Congress. Between 1881 and 1912, 42 bills, each proposing a hall of records, were introduced and all failed to secure passage.

The new century also brought a new awareness of records storage and care problems as well as potential remedies. "Until the early years of the twentieth century the idea of a 'hall of records' envisioned little more than a warehouse for the storage of records."³ A move for proper housing and care of records had begun at the state level and coincided with a revival of archival advancement in Europe. Also two dedicated and influential historians, John Franklin Jameson and Waldo Gifford Leland, began their campaign for archival preservation and the establishment of a National Archives.

The movement progressed at a leisurely pace, but eventually succeeded. In 1913 Congress authorized preparation of plans for a national archives building. World War I delayed but did not permanently shelve the project, as the stipulation that the planners inspect most modern European archives buildings was officially removed three years later. In 1925 President Calvin Coolidge recommended additional buildings to house and protect the records of the government. One year later Congress appropriated funds for a national archives building. "By then the goal had become not storage for records to be still under the control of individual agencies, but construction of a building in which the federal government's records of permanent value, its archives, could be centrally and professionally preserved and administered."⁴ Ground breaking occurred in 1931 and two years later President Herbert Hoover laid the cornerstone.

Just as construction moved forward, so too did national archives legislation. On June 19, 1934, the 73rd Congress passed the National Archives Act. This legislation established an independent National Archives and called for the appointment of an independent Archivist of the United States, as well as an advisory National Archives Council. Given broad powers, the Archivist and his deputies were authorized to inspect any and all federal records wherever located, and with the approval of the Council, to requisition such material for transfer to the National Archives. Their mission was to appraise, accession, preserve and make available for research the official records of enduring value.⁵

The next seven years were marked by experimentation and adaptation. A staff had to be recruited, proper equipment located, and principles and procedures developed to deal with the records problem. Record management and administration, appraisal, accessioning, arranging and describing techniques were developed, as were modern and scientific methods of archival preservation, restoration, and duplication. A national association of archivists had been formed, and a presidential archives established at Hyde Park, New York.

America's entrance into World War II ended this first phase of growth. The onset of the war brought immediate manpower and equipment shortages, but also had long term implications for the National Archives. The numerical strength of the armed forces mushroomed, and numerous emergency agencies were organized to deal with various aspects of a wartime government and economy.

This deluge of paper necessitated a more efficient, orderly, and economical means of dealing with these records. It became apparent that the records could be better controlled if the creating agencies took greater care in the creation, filing, and maintenance of their records. As a means of achieving this, Congress passed the Records Disposal Act of 1943. Along with subsequent amendments, this piece of legislation authorized continuing disposal schedules for specific records common to all or many agencies.⁶ It soon became apparent that this would only be a temporary measure. The emergency agencies had generated a great mass of paper, but even their liquidation did not alleviate the problem. Government assistance and regulation had been extended into previously untouched areas of American life. This resulted in an increased quantity and complexity of paperwork.

To cope with this increasingly complex situation, archival interest expanded in the direction of records management and administration. In 1946, Executive Order 9784 directed each agency to develop an active records management program. Agencies were to retain current records, dispose of useless records, or transfer those of enduring value to the National Archives. "The Bureau of the Budget, with the advice and assistance of the National Archives, would conduct inspections, require reports and issue directives and regulations concerning the orderly disposition of unnecessary records."⁷ This concept emphasized a reduction in the creation of unnecessary papers, proper identification and filing, and greater involvement with past, present, and future documentation.

This concern for current federal records and the desire for a staff service agency for all federal agencies and the public eventually led to the records center concept. It was physically impossible for the National Archives Building to house the records located both in and outside Washington, DC. Many of these records were generally covered by a retention period which scheduled them for eventual disposal, barred immediate destruction, and made transfer to the National Archives a questionable move.

Various federal agencies experimented with low cost record centers to house these and other relatively inactive federal records. The Army and Navy pioneered such programs. They established repositories which combined the idea of an economical center for the storage of records of marginal value, the concept of regional archival repositories, and the hall-of-records approach of inexpensively dealing with semiactive records.⁸ Support for such a concept showed increased concern of the National Archives staff for more efficient and economical records management.

In order to further these principles President Truman approved on July 7, 1947, the Lodge-Brown Act which established a Commission on the Organization of the Executive Branch of Government. Nine months later this group, also known as the Hoover Commission, set up a task force to study the federal records management problem.⁹ Among its proposals for advisory, educational, and more efficient undertakings was a recommendation to place the National Archives in a Federal Records Administration. The strong emphasis on this bureau as a service agency led the Hoover Commission logically to associate it with other general service and housekeeping agencies of the government.¹⁰

Congress followed up on this proposal with the passage of the Federal Property and Administrative Services Act of 1949. Signed into law on June 30, this legislation combined five previously independent agencies, including the National Archives, under one umbrella agency, the General Services Administration (GSA). In December, 1949, due to intra-agency reorganization and concern for more efficient records management, the National Archives was renamed the National Archives and Records Service (NARS).

However, NARS and the General Services Administration required stronger legislation if they were to effectively implement a government wide records management program. The Federal Records Act of 1950 filled this need. Heads of federal agencies were directed to make and keep adequate records of their organizations, and to establish records management programs. This action also repealed the National Archives Act of 1934, as amended, and transferred all national archival and records management authority from the Archivist of the United States to the Administrator of General

Services. He was charged with improving procedures, methods, and standards regarding the creation of records and their organization, maintenance, use when current, and disposition. Included in his powers was specific authorization to establish and operate records centers.¹¹

Such legislation set the future course for the National Archives and Records Service. Increased annual federal records production and the pressures of two world wars, the Korean Conflict, and international crises generated large amounts of paper. Experiments with low cost housing, compact shelving, and efficient use of space and personnel led to the evolution, growth, and maturation of the records center concept. The creation of the Office of Federal Records Centers within the National Archives and Records Service and facilities such as the National Personnel Records Center were end products of this long, evolutionary process.

NPRC'S CIVILIAN ANTECEDENTS

One of the two buildings that house NPRC records is located on a bluff overlooking the Mississippi River at 111 Winnebago Street on St. Louis' south side. This facility opened in 1961. Its origins, however, are found nearly 20 years earlier and several hundred miles away.

On December 1, 1942 the War Department, within the structure of its Adjutant General's Office (AGO), activated the Central Records Section, Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) in the M. E. Smith Building, 911 Douglas Street, Omaha, Nebraska. During the years the CCC was in operation, the War Department assembled CCC enrollees; provided transportation to camps, housing, food, and medical services; and was in general charge of camp finances and operations. One major reason for establishing the Central Records Section was to bring together in one location the War Department's records concerning the administration of the CCC. The intent was to reduce overhead costs and speed up administrative action in connection with those records during the Washington-based liquidation of that depression-era organization. Redesignated the Discontinued Projects Branch, AGO on March 1, 1943, this activity took on the additional responsibilities concerning the War Department's functions in the liquidation of the Federal Security Agency CCC Motor Repair Shops, and the Army War Shows. These duties were largely accomplished by mid-1943.¹

The War Department's Civilian Personnel Circular No. 3 of July 6, 1943, provided the Discontinued Projects Branch with a new mission. Effective August 1, 1943, it was designated the central depository for all personnel folders of former War Department

civilian employees.² Additionally, the War Department ordered that from this time forward only one personnel folder would be kept for each of its employees. The past practice of creating multiple folders had greatly added to the mass of records which the Department had to store.³

These actions represented an effort by the War Department to deal with the growing problems of storing and servicing the records of its former employees. These records were located at thousands of War Department facilities around the globe. With the advent of World War II and a burgeoning federal civilian work force, the problems promised to become severe.⁴

The Discontinued Projects Branch immediately began centralizing the War Department's files of separated personnel. During the first year approximately six million folders were received in Omaha.⁵ The Branch experimented with microfilming in an attempt to reduce space needs and thus the cost of storage. Appraisal and disposition actions were taken to separate important records from those which could be destroyed.⁶

In 1945, the War Department decided to take the consolidation of its records one step further. During World War II, numerous records depositories had been created at points throughout the country to house military and civilian personnel and pay records. The Department now wished to bring these records together at one location. The site chosen was an inactivated ordnance plant at 4300 Goodfellow Boulevard in St. Louis, MO. This facility was designated the Records Administration Center, AGO. As part of the consolidation effort the War Department, on November 15, 1945, established a civilian Pay Records Section at the new activity in St. Louis.⁷

On April 8, 1946, the Discontinued Projects Branch became part of the new Records Administration Center. It was retitled the Civilian Personnel Records Branch (CPRB). The physical transfer of 123 railroad carloads of records and 15 moving vanloads of office equipment from Omaha to St. Louis took 52 days and was completed on May 15, 1946.⁸

Important record blocks soon began to accumulate at the Goodfellow Boulevard location. On July 1, 1947, CPRB received the War Department's collection of audited Individual Earnings Records (IER's). When the National Security Act of 1947 established the Air Force as a separate department of the newly created National Military Establishment in September of that year, the Air Force chose to retain the Army's CPRB as its depository for personnel records of separated employees. (This act also redesignated the War Department as the Department of the Army). During 1948, medical treatment records, medical cards and clinical records of civilian employees, military dependents and other civilians treated at Army hospitals were added to CPRB's holdings. On July 1, 1950, CPRB accepted the transfer of the remaining functions and records of the deactivated Civilian Retirement Accounts Branch, AGO.⁹ By this time a good degree of consolidation of former civilian employee records had been achieved with the growth of the Army's Civilian Personnel Records Branch.

Within the rest of the federal government there remained a great deal to do if consolidation was to be a goal. A 1950 survey revealed that the personnel records of all federal agencies' former employees were scattered among 22,950 locations. Most of these employees had once worked for military establishments. Pay records were filed in nearly 5,000 sites. Many records were duplicates. There were numerous inconsistencies

in the handling of accumulations of records by different agencies. It was difficult and very costly to provide accurate reference service.¹⁰

Efforts were soon made to alleviate these problems. The National Security Act Amendments of 1949 had created the Department of Defense as the successor agency to the National Military Establishment. The Office of the Secretary of Defense was given authority and control over the military departments of Army, Navy and Air Force. A few months after the results of the above mentioned survey were known, Secretary of Defense George C. Marshall exercised this centralized directive authority in a move aimed at improving the records situation. On December 4, 1950, he recommended in a letter to Jess Larson, Administrator of General Services, that GSA assume custody of the personnel records of former civilian employees of the Department of Defense components. This proposal was accepted in the Administrator's reply of April 25, 1951.¹¹

Because of this pending transfer and because the Korean Conflict had resulted in a need for returning the ordnance plant in which the Army's CPRB was located to its original purpose, a new home for the records of former civilian employees was needed. On September 4, 1951, a move began to the Butler Brothers Building at 18th and Locust Streets in downtown St. Louis. Officials had based their decision to relocate the records to another building in St. Louis because of the city's central location in the country, and because of the economy achieved in moving records only across town and in retaining 256 experienced employees.¹²

The physical transfer was completed on September 28, 1951. On October 29, 1951, the records and functions of the Army's CPRB were formally transferred to GSA. On that day the St. Louis Federal Records Center (FRC), a part of the National Archives and Records Service, GSA, came into being. Benjamin F. Cutcliffe was placed in charge of the new Center on that day.¹³

Other significant record groups quickly began to arrive. The Department of the Navy followed the example of the other branches of the Armed Forces in November; it disestablished its civilian personnel records center in Mechanicsburg, Pennsylvania, and forwarded those files to the new St. Louis FRC. A short time later the Veterans Administration transferred all former employee personnel records held in its Philadelphia records center. The Department of Agriculture was the next agency to send records. Then, on March 3, 1953, the Civil Service Commission, under authority of Executive Order 9784, ordered nearly all federal agencies to retire to St. Louis the Official Personnel Folders (OPF's) of all civilian employees one year after their separation. In April of 1954 the Post Office Department agreed to transfer its pay and personnel records. By June of that year approximately 40 million personnel records had been sent to the St. Louis FRC.¹⁴

An additional significant transfer to St. Louis was that of the Civil Service Commission's service record folders and locator files on present and separated federal employees. The Commission sent these 41,566 cubic feet of records in 1955. This action eliminated duplicate records and, as a result, reduced personnel, storage and equipment costs. At that time the St. Louis FRC became the sole depository for records of separated federal civilian employees.¹⁵

By 1955, the year that John L. McLaughlin, Chief of the Reference Branch at the St. Louis FRC, became its new Center Manager, the St. Louis operation had proved itself a success. Consolidation of former civilian employee personnel folders at one location clearly represented a financial savings. At the time of the aforementioned 1950 survey it had taken 360 full-time and 200 part-time employees to maintain and service these records. In 1955 the same services required only 260 employees. There also was a significant savings in the amount of space used by the government to store these personnel records. The quality of reference service had seen tremendous improvement. Before consolidation the difficulties of fully and swiftly documenting an employee's service history from multiple sources and incomplete records had sometimes seemed insurmountable. These service histories had become essential to an employee in terms of earned leave, reduction-in-force status, and pension annuities. Consolidation in St. Louis had resulted in fully documentable federal employment histories as well as quick reference service.¹⁶

The Butler Brothers Building, of which the St. Louis FRC occupied only the top four floors, fulfilled its purpose as an interim facility; nevertheless, it was obvious that a new building, specifically designed for records storage, was needed. In 1958 Congress appropriated funds for the construction of a building to house the Center. The 13.2 acre site chosen was that of the old federal Marine Hospital at Marine and Winnebago Streets in south St. Louis. This building, which had been in federal service since 1852, had originally been erected to house sick seamen and boatmen of the western United States. A marble fireplace was salvaged when the hospital was torn down in 1959. It was then placed in the Center Manager's office in the new St. Louis FRC building.¹⁷

The new 111 Winnebago Street facility was completed in the spring of 1961. Over 460,000 cubic feet of records had been accumulated during the ten years in the Butler Brothers Building. The entire holdings were moved to the new building between June 19 and September 22, 1961. Formal dedication took place on November 30, 1961. More than 600 people attended, including elected local and federal office holders and officials from NARS and GSA.¹⁸

The cost of the St. Louis FRC's new home was \$5,614,363. The two story building measures 587 feet by 542 feet, covers approximately 7 acres and contains 443,534 square feet of floor space. The interior is divided into office areas, support facilities, a 953 square foot vault, and ten record stack areas protected by fire walls. Each stack area contains about 40,000 square feet of floor space.¹⁹

The Center and its staff of 202 began immediately to expand operations. New record holdings included program and administrative records from federal agencies in the St. Louis metropolitan area. Soon, 75,000 cubic feet of military entrance and separation x-rays arrived. In 1962, 51,000 cubic feet of Army and Air Corps dependent medical records were received. In 1963, 63,704 cubic feet of General Accounting Office (GAO) records were received from the Army Finance Center in Indianapolis, Indiana. These were settlements for Army military and civilian payrolls for the years 1943-1951. An additional 9,220 cubic feet of GAO Navy settlement records from the Chicago FRC, and 77,377 cubic feet of GAO Army records from Cameron Station in Alexandria, Virginia were received later. Official Personnel Folders from federal agencies continued to be retired at a rate of approximately 600,000 per year.²⁰

From its inception in 1951, the St. Louis FRC had been made up of two branches, the Reference Branch and the Accessioning and Disposal Branch, both under the direction of the Center Manager. The former was responsible for all phases of answering inquiries and the latter for all operations involving the receiving and disposition of records. When the new Winnebago facility began accepting major holdings of local agency records, a new unit, the General Reference Section, was established within the Reference Branch. This section would eventually become the General Reference Branch.²¹

During the early years of operation in the new building, FRC personnel developed an important new system for filing Official Personnel Folders. At the Butler Brothers Building those folders retired before 1952 had been arranged by agency record group and in alphabetical order. Those retired after 1952 were put into one consolidated run. Folders were filed by soundex code, a system which assigns a combination alphabetical and numerical code to names. While the Consolidated file was superior to the multiple alphabetical files, it had a major inherent problem. It required newly retired folders to be interfiled among the existing folders. The result was costly rewarehousing (often referred to as file expansion or file fleeting).²²

To alleviate this problem a computer registry system was developed, in which each arriving folder is assigned a consecutive registry number. A computer matches an individual's name, birth date, and Social Security number with the appropriate registry number. The newest accessions are then filed in the next available stack space. Thus, interfiling is not necessary since the file is merely expanded at one end. This system has been in effect since April 1, 1965.²³

On May 8, 1964, Center Manager John L. McLaughlin retired. His successor was Albert J. Petroski from the NARS Military Personnel Records Center (MPRC) at 9700 Page Boulevard, Overland, Missouri. Two years later, in May 1966, the St. Louis FRC and MPRC were merged into one organization. The new activity was titled the National Personnel Records Center (NPRC). Joseph L. Wertzberger, Center Manager of MPRC, was named as NPRC's first Center Manager.

NPRC'S MILITARY ANTECEDENTS

The second of the two buildings that house the records of the National Personnel Records Center, is located at 9700 Page Boulevard in Overland, Missouri, a suburb of St. Louis. Designed as a central storage facility, this Center became responsible for the receipt, processing, housing, and administration of personnel and medical records of former members of the armed forces, as well as various military organizational records.

The records center concept and the eventual growth of this part of the NPRC can be traced to World War II, the proliferation of military records, and the impact of each on records management. As America geared to meet the war effort, recruits swelled the ranks of the armed forces and new military organizations evolved to meet the needs of a fighting force. Individual service records, medical files, and organizational records all required storage space.

Such space in wartime Washington was quite valuable. A presidential directive called for the decentralization of as many agencies as possible to locations outside the Washington area. The Army and Army Air Force military personnel files of the Demobilized Records Branch (DRB) were divided among several locations in the city before their move to High Point, North Carolina in December 1942.¹

Responsible for Army records created after November 1, 1912, the DRB re-organized within two years of the move to meet the influx of World War II records. A separate branch for World War II records was soon replaced by a single Demobilized Personnel Records Branch (DPRB). Within this branch separate World War I and World War II sections (see the appendix) were created, and an Organizational Records Branch established in Savannah, Georgia.

By 1945 space limitations and the high cost of leasing posed problems for the Army, and efforts were made to seek a central storage location. On September 1, 1945, the Records Administration Center (RAC) of the Adjutant General's Office (AGO) was activated at the St. Louis Administration Center, 4300 Goodfellow Boulevard. Transfers began almost immediately. On October 20, 1945, all of the DPRB, except the World War I Section, moved to St. Louis from High Point. The Organizational Records Branch followed three months later from Savannah. The World War I Section of the DPRB did not transfer to the Center until March 20, 1946.²

The succeeding years brought numerous changes for the RAC. The National Security Act of 1947 created a separate Department of the Air Force, but the records of this new department continued to be administered by the Department of the Army. By 1949, due in part to the expanding activities of the DRB, a critical space shortage developed at the Records Administration Center. To remedy this situation the Organizational Records Branch moved to the Kansas City Records Center (AGO) in 1950. This granted a temporary reprieve, but by 1952 Colonel John J. Donovan, commanding officer of the RAC, estimated that the Demobilized Personnel Records Branch housed and administered more than 17½ million individual records of separated Army and Air Force personnel.³

In addition to these spatial concerns, America's involvement in the Korean Conflict posed another problem, particularly for the Army and Air Force facilities in St. Louis. The Records Administration Center was housed at the deactivated St. Louis Ordnance Plant. With America's participation in the hostilities the plant was reactivated for the production of small arms ammunition. Another relocation appeared imminent, but this time it would be to a structure specifically designed for records storage.

The Naval Records Management Center, Garden City, New York, not only experienced similar difficulties, but was the center within the Naval Records Management System which would have the most immediate impact on the proposed St. Louis facility. While the Navy centers handled a variety of records, the Garden City Center maintained and serviced medical records of discharged Navy and Marine Corps personnel, non-current medical records from ships and stations, discharged Navy and Marine Corps enlisted personnel records, and grade data cards. In addition, records of Navy and Marine Corps activities in the First and Third Naval Districts were housed at this facility.⁴ By 1950 the Garden City Center had outgrown its location. Many of these records would eventually be transferred and form the nucleus of the St. Louis Naval Records Management Center.

As a result of such problems the Department of Defense decided to construct a center to house the military personnel records, and in 1951 asked the St. Louis architectural firm of Helmuth, Yamasaki, and Lineweber, Inc. to design such a building. Early in the same year a site board convened in St. Louis to select a location for the proposed Department of Defense Military Personnel Records Center (DoDMPRC). They chose a 42.04 acre

tract located west of Woodson Road and south of Page Boulevard in Overland.⁵ Public Laws 155 and 254, 82nd Congress, granted authority and funds for construction of the Center.

Preliminary planning began in 1952 and called for a building design predicated on simplicity and economy of construction, consistent with operational requirements and sound architectural and engineering practice. Operating costs in the completed structure were to be kept to a minimum, and it was to adequately cover expansion needs for the next ten years.⁶ To meet these needs the architects analyzed functions, interrelationships, and space requirements, and spent forty weeks preparing the working drawings and specifications. The U. S. Army Corps of Engineers erected a six story structure, 728 feet long and 282 feet wide, which contained 1,240,000 square feet of floor space. The cost was \$12.5 million.⁷

The Department of Defense Military Personnel Records Center had been designated as an installation of the Department of the Army and established as a facility for joint use by the Departments of the Army, Air Force, and Navy. This Center not only housed military records of separated personnel from the constituent military services of the Department of Defense, but also records center activities of the Departments of the Army, Navy, and Air Force, and those activities assigned for support purposes. The concept was one large building occupied by three individual, independent records centers.

Department of the Army General Order No. 67, dated December 14, 1955, redesignated the Goodfellow facility as the Army Records Center and relocated it to the DoDMPRC effective January 1, 1956.⁸ Three trucking firms contracted for the move which was to be accomplished within 90 working days at a cost of \$120,000. Once completed, the Army Records Center worked to provide record depository and information services on permanent personnel records of separated Army and Air Force personnel.⁹

Subsequent to the move the Air Force temporarily utilized the facilities of the new Army Records Center for storage and servicing of separated Air Force military personnel records. Department of the Army custodianship of Air Force organizational records continued until July 1, 1956. On that date the Kansas City Annex of the Air Force Records Center assumed custody of about 135,000 cubic feet of records. One year later the Air Force Records Center, St. Louis, assumed custody of about 1,810,000 personnel folders of former Air Force personnel and previous service records of airmen currently on active duty. The Center also acquired microfilm and current paper collections of Air Force Morning Reports and Excused from Duty Reports.¹⁰ During the first half of 1957 the organizational records were moved from the Kansas City Annex to the Air Force Records Center located in the DoDMPRC.

However, the classified records were not included in this move. Such records required special storage facilities not yet available at the St. Louis facility. Prior to the completion of the Air Force Records Center vault, classified Air Force records were dispersed and stored in the Army Records Center and the Kansas City Records Center.¹¹ In March, 1959, these records were moved to the Air Force Records Center.

The third group, the Naval Records Management Center, moved to the St. Louis DoDMPRC from Garden City, New York. Beginning on March 1, 1956, the move involved almost 16 million service and health records of Navy and Marine Corps personnel and 125,000 cubic feet of various school, medical, and disciplinary records.¹² Once completed, the center's mission was: to accept, store and service these noncurrent and semiactive records; to examine, appraise and dispose of such records in accordance with the law and Navy Regulations; to preserve important documentation of transactions of the Naval Establishment; and to provide technical assistance on problems of record retirement and disposal.¹³

The three services worked out a joint agreement for the management and operation of the Center. The Department of the Army provided all support services, including those for the Navy and Air Force, and budgeted for all costs of ground and building maintenance. The Navy provided its own civilian personnel classification and fiscal and accounting services, while the Air Force furnished data and assistance necessary for budget preparation. Expenses for personnel assigned to mission functions and operations were covered by the budgets of the respective military departments.¹⁴

On July 1, 1960, the General Services Administration (GSA) absorbed the Air Force Records Center, the World War I and II holdings of the Army Records Center, and the naval records of the Naval Records Management Center.¹⁵ These were consolidated into one center and administered by the National Archives and Records Service (NARS) within GSA.

This newly created Military Personnel Records Center (MPRC) was really only an amalgamation of several records centers or partial records centers. These centers, operated independently of one another by three military departments with three diverse operational systems, had to be combined into one unified, economical, efficient system. To mold these units into a working center, management followed, with slight modification, the standard organizational structure for all NARS operated centers.

A Reference Service Branch planned, coordinated, and directed reference service operations. Organized in sections according to branch of service, clerks answered requests for information from personnel and medical records of former military personnel, and the various noncurrent service organizational records. An Accession and Disposal Branch arranged for the transfer of such records, provided technical assistance and guidance to field offices and agencies, and served as technical advisor to the Center Chief.¹⁶ The Special Projects Branch conducted or supervised special analyses, studies, and surveys pertaining to Center activity or complex problems not within the normal scope of the Center's operations. It was also responsible for production reporting, manpower utilization and controls, financial controls, and employee development, as well as the archival facilities, and reimbursable services.¹⁷

This consolidation and reorganization brought additional changes. During the early months, management concentrated on reducing the reference service backlog and evaluated accessioning, administrative, and correspondence practices. Simplification and standardization of the inherited file groups, organization, and operations procedures were primary concerns.

At the time of the consolidation in 1960, a great potential existed for work simplification and standardization studies. Three diverse operational systems produced much duplication, and various means of dealing with similar requests.¹⁸ Due to the stipulations of the individual transfer agreements, and the fact that MPRC did not have legal custody of the records, procedural changes usually required the consent of the armed forces. The dissimilar content of the service records, a condition that has not been rectified, added to these processing problems.

The early years were busy and at time frustrating, but by 1965 strides had been made in many areas. Procedures for answering reference service inquiries, such as verification of military service for the Veterans Administration, or replacement of lost or destroyed discharge certificates were simplified and made more uniform. The number of forms was reduced by combining similar forms and eliminating those which did not justify retention. The release policies of the various service branches were compiled, consolidated under similar headings, and issued in table form. Source document guides, identifying both primary and secondary sources for each record group had also been printed.¹⁹ A classification system which ranked cases according to level of difficulty, and the Work-In-File (WIF) concept were additional procedural considerations.

Administrative changes continued with the implementation of a Quality Assurance Program on September 14, 1962, in the Reference Service Branch. This program provided a uniform, systematic reviewing procedure for monitoring the quality of information furnished to requesters by the Center. Based on a random audit, this

program considered both the quality and quantity aspects of production, with the sampling rate adjusted according to the seriousness or frequency of errors. A high percentage of review would be required in poor quality areas and less review in good quality areas.

The quality and efficiency of records retrieval also underwent scrutiny and change. The original pre-1960 system posed several problems for the MPRC. Due to the previous military records centers that administered the records, the file groups were spread out over four floors of a six story building. Of the twelve file groups at the MPRC, nine were alphabetical systems. The remaining three were filed by either case file, terminal digit, or registry number. Upon arrival records had to be separated into individual blocks such as Navy, Coast Guard, Marine Corps, or Bureau of Medicine and Surgery. These had to be routed to different file areas and sorted into alpha breaks for filing. Such filing systems may have been adequate when each department had its own depository, but presented many disadvantages in an integrated operation.²⁰

Such a system affected the day to day operation of the Center. Unproductive first searches and subsequent verification searches utilized time and money. Under the filing systems inherited from the services few unproductive searches could be determined in advance, because the files had to be physically searched to determine if the records were in the Center. In addition, productivity rates and searching and filing standards varied from record group to record group. Therefore, clerks had to be acquainted with numeric and alphabetic systems, their location, filing method and the various standards applicable to a particular file group.²¹

In addition, partially filled equipment did not provide for maximum space or equipment utilization. Constant interfiling used space, spread the latest records, which have the highest inquiry rate, over a large area, and necessitated regular file expansion. A costly operation, it required spreading out the records, relocating and reindexing cabinets. As of 1963 slightly more than one-half of the personnel records were in cutoff files, those groups that did not receive or add new records. Of the open files, the Navy and Air Force groups would have required expansion sometime between the years 1965 and 1969.²²

The solution to such problems was to cut off all the inherited military file groups, retaining service identity, and establish a new integrated file group. While the older groups would have continued to require limited searching, the new Registry System attempted to eliminate many of the problems of the spread out groups. This proposed system was located on one floor, in one location, and involved but one search.

The MPRC began utilizing this system in 1964 to accession and retrieve military personnel records. The order in which records arrived at this Center became less important, because they were no longer separated according to record block. Assigned a registry number in straight sequential order, an Air Force record could now be found sandwiched between a Coast Guard and Marine Corps folder. Registry number, not service branch designation, became the primary factor, as the number was used to arrange the records in numeric sequence and identify the file location for each record. The Registry System permitted maximum space utilization and allowed for the complete use of storage equipment. It also provided intellectual control over the records and made a specific yes or no response possible before an inquiry was read, routed, sorted, and reread.²³

As the Center grew, so too did its accessions. The Marine Corps transferred discharged military personnel records in 1962, as did the Coast Guard two years later. Effective August 1, 1964, Headquarters Marine Corps transferred the function of issuing service awards, campaign and service medals, and unit awards to discharged, separated or retired Marine Corps personnel. About 88 cubic feet of records pertaining to these awards were sent from the National Archives and the Federal Records Center, Alexandria, Virginia. By the end of the year an agreement with the Air Force authorized MPRC to process similar requests for discharged Air Force personnel.²⁴ One year later the Navy transferred Navy officer records (including retired), Navy inactive enlisted reserve records, and Navy (Bureau of Medicine and Surgery) reserve medical records. The same year the Marine Corps transferred inactive reserve records.

However, internal changes and the arrival of additional records were not the only significant events for the MPRC. In May 1966 the Military Personnel Records Center and the St. Louis Federal Records Center merged to form the National Personnel Records Center. The emphasis for the future was a two building, one organization, national center concept.

NPRC'S ORGANIZATIONAL STRUCTURE AND STORAGE ARRANGEMENTS

1966 TO THE PRESENT

Prior to the merger of the Military Personnel Records Center and the St. Louis Federal Records Center, each independent center reported directly to the NARS Regional Director, Region 6. However, effective July 1, 1966, the new NPRC became an organizational unit of the Office of Federal Records Centers, NARS, Central Office. The Regional Administrator, Kansas City, Missouri continued to provide administrative support, but direct program supervision was assigned to the Assistant Archivist for Federal Records Centers.¹

The majority of NPRC's customer agencies, either branch or headquarters offices, were located in the Washington, DC metropolitan area. Frequent contacts, usually at the departmental level, were generally regulated by formal interagency agreements or memoranda of understanding. Placement of the NPRC under the direction of the NARS Central Office was designed to aid program direction and supervision, consistent with its mission, function, and customer relations.²

Internally, the new NPRC consisted of four branches, all under the direction of one center manager. Three branches were those of the old MPRC, while the fourth, the Civilian Reference Branch, had been part of the old St. Louis Federal Records Center. Located in the Winnebago building, this fourth branch handled Official Personnel Folders (OPF's) and related records, general purpose records, including x-rays and medical records of Army and Air Force dependents, and finally, research and coordination.³

This variation of the standard federal records center organizational structure favored generalization rather than specialization. According to Joseph L. Wertzberger, the first Center Manager, it was the intent of the original MPRC reorganization to "broaden the abilities and experiences of the work force to increase flexibility."⁴ Combining cases from all branches of service required less breakdown in work distribution and added variety to the employees' work. Generalized knowledge also removed the need for training or familiarization in other departments for employees promoted to higher levels.

However, some critics felt this organization too fragmented. Many small units within the branches created excessive supervisory levels. For NPRC operations at the Page building inquiries were processed not only by different units on the basis of the source or record block and level of difficulty, but also by manner received, such as TWX, telephone, or U. S. Mail. The status of the subject, either officer or enlisted, and of the request, urgent or routine, were additional factors.⁵

Proponents of specialization, that is, reorganization according to military branch of service, stressed benefits such as greater productivity and better quality work. Clerks would become specialists in a particular department's policies and procedures. This would remedy confusion caused by switching from branch to branch, and the need for familiarity with a wide span of policies, procedures, regulations, and record documentation practices.⁶ Also, supervisors would be better equipped to give prompt and effective technical guidance.

Studies conducted by the NPRC Special Projects Branch and management consultants such as Charles A. Sterman discussed the merits of each system. Finally, in late 1971 a decision was reached. GSA Order OFA P 5440.1, Change 215, dated October 19, 1971, announced a complete reorganization of the NPRC. Two new deputy positions, one at each building, were established to aid in the management of the military and civilian operations. An Administrative Support Staff under the direction of the Center Manager, and Management and Technical Staffs to assist the deputy managers were established under this plan. Operations at the Page building were reorganized according to service element into an Army, Navy, and Air Force Branch. At the Winnebago facility section three of the Civilian Reference Branch was redesignated the General Reference Branch. To provide support services an Operations Branch was established at each building. Such a breakdown afforded a greater opportunity for specialization, provided more supervisory assistance, and greater opportunities for promotions in the middle grades.

While the Center organization was undergoing internal change, the accessioning, disposal, and rewarehousing of various record groups continued at the NPRC. At the Page building closely related record blocks were not housed together, but spread over several floors. This arrangement did not use space efficiently, caused a constant loss of manpower, and necessitated wide areas of supervision.

Beginning in the late 1960's, the NPRC initiated a rewarehousing/shelving program at the Page building to correct these arrangement deficiencies and meet future expansion needs. The plan called for the location of all Army World War I, World War II, and Post-World War II records, and all Air Force records on the sixth floor. All Coast Guard,

Navy, and Marine Corps service and health records would be placed on the fifth floor. The Army, Air Force, and Navy organizational records would remain on the third floor, with the Registry File on the second floor.⁷

In order to conserve time and space, a shelving program coincided with the rewarehousing program. For all areas except the second floor Registry File, shelving replaced file cabinets. These empty file cabinets were transported to the second floor and double stacked to meet the needs of the expanding Registry File. Four layers of drawers were placed atop the original five drawer cabinets. Once full floor capacity had been reached, the oldest records were transferred from the four lower drawers into the upper five layers. New accessions, as they arrived, were placed in the lower four layers.⁸

Such accessions continued to arrive at the NPRC. Throughout the 1966 to 1970 period the Army continued to transfer blocks of personnel and organizational records. The 1962 to 1968 group contained 1.3 million records, the largest portion in the 1964 to 1968 time period.⁹ These dates coincided with the escalation of United States involvement in Vietnam. Once again, armed conflict added to the volume of records created, serviced, maintained, and stored by the armed forces and eventually the NPRC.

Due to the influx of such volumes the Registry File grew at a rapid pace. By its fourth year this file had absorbed space which according to earlier projections was not to be reached until the seventh year.¹⁰ In addition to size, the variety of records posed problems for employees who had to be familiar with the rules and regulations for all branches of service.

To remedy such problems, effective January 1, 1972, additions to the Consolidated Registry File stopped, and the individual Army, Navy and Air Force service registry files were established. The former remained intact until March 1978 when a conversion project was initiated to dismantle the cabinets and separate the records by service group. A composite of all branches of service, these records were separated, given new labels and numbers, and refiled according to branch of service in their respective homogeneous groups. When budget restrictions shut down the conversion project in October 1980, only one small section of the Consolidated Registry File remained.¹¹

The high rise, narrow aisle storage system necessary to deal with such volumes has been modified to meet the needs of a modern center. Shelving replaced the nine drawer file cabinets, while rewarehousing/shelving programs were implemented to achieve additional space and a more efficient control of record groups. According to a 1970 study, these programs would provide an additional 162,000 cubic feet capacity. This should, the study felt, allow the NPRC to accession and store additional records at the Page building through 1980. This was an accurate prediction, since 1981 estimates state space will now be available until 1984.¹²

Similar concerns existed at the Winnebago building. As of March 1970, its holdings totaled 995,100 cubic feet. The largest volume, Official Personnel Folders (OPF's) of former federal civilian employees, totaled 420,600 cubic feet. Agency pay and leave records raised the volume of personnel records to over a half million cubic feet. Other records included General Accounting Office (GAO) payrolls (146,000 cubic feet), Army and Air Force military dependent medical records (153,000 cubic feet) and x-rays

(100,000 cubic feet).¹³ Many of these records were categorized as disposable, but the retention periods generally fell into the 50 year or more category.

The arrival of a new record group added to spatial concerns and had a significant impact for the Winnebago building. In January 1973 the Winnebago building began servicing the Internal Revenue Service Processing Center, Memphis, Tennessee. Established a year earlier, the Memphis Center processed tax returns for the Tennessee, North Carolina, Virginia, West Virginia, and Kentucky area. The majority of these tax returns had a seven year retention period. Before any returns became disposable, space requirements for possibly 340,000 cubic feet of tax returns affected office space, number of reference service employees, and possible rewarehousing.¹⁴ Spatial problems and planning took on added importance.

To meet storage needs, the Winnebago building also initiated a rewarehousing/shelving program. Prior to 1970, storage areas on the ground floor consisted of 75 percent cabinets and 25 percent ten- high shelving units. The lower level storage areas were all shelved, but most with ten- high shelving units. In order to increase record storage space the cabinets were converted to fourteen-high shelving units, as were the old ten-high units. This conversion did supply additional space. Current reports estimate that an additional module will not be needed until 1990.¹⁵

Just as the rewarehousing/reshelving continued, so too did other internal reorganizations take place at the NPRC. During the second half of 1973 several events occurred which would effect the future of the NPRC. Joseph Wertzberger, first Center Director, retired

and was replaced by Acting Director Warren B. Griffin. Later that year Mr. Griffin was appointed Center Director, but not before a disastrous fire on the sixth floor necessitated a series of temporary Center reorganizations. Effective August 13, 1973, a Records Recovery Branch was established for the recovery, restoration, arrangement, and description of fire- and water-damaged records. The Army, Navy, and Air Force Reference Branches merged to form Reference Branch Number One and Reference Branch Number Two. A two shift operation, each handled the functions previously performed by the service oriented branches.¹⁶

To meet long term data reconstruction needs OFA P 5440.1, Change 309, dated December 28, 1973 announced an additional reorganization of the NPRC. The Records Recovery Branch was abolished and its functions transferred to the newly created Records Input and Reconstruction Branch which was largely responsible for solving reference problems caused by the fire. Returning to organization according to service element, an Army Branch, Navy Branch, and Air Force Branch replaced the two Reference Branches. The Military Operations Branch gave way to the new Military Office Services and Disposal Branch.

One and one half years later OFA P 5440.1, Change 366, dated June 11, 1975, announced another reorganization. Abolishing the Administrative Staff, the two (civilian and military) Management and Technical Staffs were combined into a single unit Management and Technical Staff under the NPRC Director. The Military Office Services and Disposal Branch and the Records Input and Reconstruction Branch were redesignated as the Military Operations Branch and the Records Reconstruction Branch, respectively.

Several years later, in January, 1979, the leadership again changed, as J. D. Kilgore succeeded retiring Director Warren B. Griffin.

One year later the Center returned to its pre-1966 placement in GSA. On April 6, 1980, the NPRC transferred, "along with its functions, personnel, positions, funds, property, and equipment from the Office of Federal Records Centers, NARS, Central Office, to NARS, Region 6."¹⁷ R. G. Freeman III, new GSA Administrator, had previously implemented a decentralization policy. Such a plan created cost-avoidance possibilities, including a substantial reduction in the Washington headquarters staff by the delegation of national programs to various Regional Administrators.¹⁸ Following these guidelines the NPRC now reported to David L. Petree, Assistant Regional Administrator, NARS, Region 6.

Within fifteen months the Center underwent its latest administrative change. In July 1981, Center Director J. D. Kilgore retired. His duties were assumed by Acting Director David L. Petree based in the Region 6 offices in Kansas City, Missouri. Branch organizations and operations remained essentially unchanged.

While this may conclude the discussion of the general background, organizational structure, and operation of the NPRC and its antecedent agencies, it is not the end of the story. Due to the nature and role of items such as the Work-In-File concept, NARS-5 system, 1973 fire, and a changing work force and work load, each required additional attention. Crossing organizational and chronological boundaries, these specific concepts, systems, and events have, in the following chapters, been accorded individual treatment.

WORK-IN-FILE

One important concept which was emphasized in work procedures in St. Louis in 1961 was that of Work-In-File (WIF). Shortly after the Page facility was turned over to GSA from the Department of Defense, personnel at the new GSA MPRC studied the potential of increasing the use of WIF to improve productivity. Before this study approximately 30% of reference service was accomplished by work done in the file area. These were the simplest types of inquiries such as: loan and transfer of records and "last known address" requests. Most cases were worked at desks in the office. Replies were typewritten. This working method was known as Work-Out-Of-File (WOOF).¹

An earlier study, accomplished in 1960, had recommended that some Veterans Administration (VA) cases be answered in longhand. The VA had agreed to this, with the understandable stipulation that replies be completed legibly. A second study of VA cases in July of 1960 recommended that more work be done in the file areas. A third study, in February 1961, supported the conclusions of the earlier two VA studies and examined case work in more detail.²

In 1961 an Organization Planning Project, set up to study all aspects of reference service, resulted in twelve studies with recommendations for improving productivity. One of the central studies was that titled "Maximize WIF Cases."³ Its purpose was to determine which types of inquiries could be converted to a WIF operation. This study projected that 84 percent of requests could be converted to WIF if some procedures were changed, portable reproduction equipment was used in the files, and certain agencies

agreed to accept handwritten replies.⁴ A study followed in October 1961 to determine the feasibility of providing WIF clerks with carts equipped with portable reproduction machines. Despite its desirability this was not proposed because the technology of the time did not allow it and reproduction was then needed in only 7 percent of the cases.⁵

By the end of 1962 the WIF Units and Searching Sections of MPRC, 34 percent of the work force, were accomplishing 80 percent of MPRC's reference service. A study in November of that year stated, "The WIF Units are the backbone of the Center's Reference Service Operation."⁶ MPRC was able to realize a net decrease in salary costs of \$534,000 and improved service after the first two years of emphasized WIF operations.⁷

Later, in 1967, a study was conducted to determine whether proper work alignment was established in the WIF operations at the Page Boulevard building of the new National Personnel Records Center (NPRC). This study recognized that there were bottlenecks in the WIF function which tended "to retard the progress of the overall performance in that operation." The main recommendation presented was that certain types of slow-moving cases and those which required some desk work be removed from the WIF operation. The ideal sought was to have the WIF and Searching personnel in the stack area a maximum amount of time, processing large numbers of those cases which required a small amount of time to complete. This represented a further refinement of the WIF operation.⁸

In 1970 a study was done to examine the continued effectiveness of WIF, mainly in light of the conversion of most file areas to ten-high shelving or ten-high drawer arrangements

from four- to five-high drawers. This study recognized the impact of this change upon WIF effectiveness, but recommended the continuance of the operation with certain modifications, because of the values achieved.⁹

WIF was used at the Winnebago building but was dropped in 1976. It was never implemented extensively and only involved a limited number of personnel, because the casework in civilian records was deemed not as well suited to WIF operations.¹⁰

Today WIF remains an important operation within the structure of NPRC. It is certainly not responsible for as much reference service as it once was, in part because some types of less complex cases are no longer worked by Center personnel and other cases have become more complex. Still, WIF represents an important development in work procedures and increased productivity. Today at NPRC three of the six branches which perform reference service employ the WIF concept.

FIRE, RECOVERY AND RECORDS RECONSTRUCTION

On July 12, 1973, disaster struck NPRC's building located at 9700 Page Boulevard in Overland, Missouri: shortly after midnight a fire was reported. Firemen and fire fighting equipment arrived at the Center only four minutes and twenty seconds after the first alarm was raised. Men entered the 728 feet by 282 feet, concrete, steel, and glass structure, and attempted to halt the fire. They reached the burning top floor. But, at 3:15 a.m. the fire fighters were forced to evacuate the building because of heavy smoke and intense heat. It was not until two days later that firemen were able to re-enter the building. The only method left on July 12th to fight the fire was the use of snorkels from which great quantities of water were poured onto the building's exterior and through its broken windows.¹

During the next day nearby residents of Overland were forced to remain in their homes because of the heavy acrid smoke which, at times, partially hid the building from view. The billowing smoke was visible miles away.² The fire burned out of control for twenty-two hours.³ It was not until the morning of July 16, approximately four and a half days after the fire was reported, that local fire departments considered the fire officially out.⁴

During the long days and nights of fighting the fire, firemen experienced grave problems with insufficient water pressure. Parts on a pumper truck failed after forty continuous hours in operation.⁵ Earlier, during Thursday evening, July 12, a section of the burning roof finally collapsed with a spectacular blaze of fire, as some of the tremendous heat

on the sixth floor escaped through the eight-inch thick, concrete roof.⁶ The fire threatened numerous times to spread down to the other floors of the building, each 200,000 square feet of virtually undivided floor space, but fire fighters were successful in stopping its advance. By the time the fire was finally out forty-two fire districts had participated in combating the disaster.⁷

Intensive investigative efforts begun during the fire were unable, because of the extensive damage, to pinpoint its cause, beginning time, and exact source. The Federal Bureau of Investigation and a General Services Administration Ad Hoc Committee on the Fire both conducted lengthy and in-depth investigations.⁸

The immediate, all-important concerns were to salvage all that was possible and to do whatever was necessary to enable the Page Boulevard facility to resume its functions. Efforts to accomplish these goals began well before the fire was extinguished. Requests and record shipments from all government agencies were temporarily halted. The Center's operating records, computer index to a large portion of NPRC's holdings, and certain microfilmed Army records housed in the building were removed for safekeeping. On July 23, 1973 a Federal Property Management Regulations Bulletin (FPMR B-39) was issued. This stopped disposal by Federal agencies of any records which might eventually be helpful in documenting military service. Employees were temporarily placed on administrative leave but returned to work on July 23 to help in recovery efforts and in the resumption of reference service. Thymol was spread throughout the building to prevent mold damage to the many wet records. After the July 23 award of a removal contract, a construction firm began the arduous task of permanently clearing off the

sixth floor. Most importantly, water- and fire-damaged records were removed from the building. These efforts were overseen by a specially appointed project manager who met regularly with top management of NPRC, the Army command that shared occupation of the Page building, consultants, and other involved parties.⁹

A primary problem was how the water-damaged records could be dried and salvaged for reference use. Some records were sent to the Winnebago Street building and placed in plastic milk cartons on open racks. Others were sent to McDonnell Douglas Aircraft Corporation, also located in the St. Louis area, and vacuum-dried.¹⁰ During this process records were repeatedly put through a hot-to-cold cycle. Records were heated to 140 degrees and then frozen while lowering pressure. This squeezed out the water molecules. The drying was done in a chamber used previously to simulate the pressure and temperature of the Mercury and Gemini space missions.¹¹ Later, some of the drying was accomplished at a National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) facility in Ohio.¹²

A 1978 NPRC internal memo listed 17,516,376 military records as destroyed or damaged in the fire; 4,577,239 were shown as recovered. Of the records in storage on the sixth floor at the time of the fire, 79.2 percent were lost. Most were Army personnel records from 1912 to 1959; the next largest group were Air Force records from 1947 to 1963, for individuals with surnames from Hubbard through "Z."¹³ Obviously the reconstruction of military service data effort was to be a massive one.

To begin this effort a Records Recovery Branch was created, and made responsible for damaged records.¹⁴ Abolished several months later, its functions were transferred to a new Records Input and Reconstruction Branch. The new branch had three sections: A Records Recovery and Reconstruction Section, a Data and Records Input Section, and an Inquiry Analysis Section.¹⁵ This branch was to be the center of efforts to reconstruct the records of military personnel whose records had been partially or completely destroyed, and who requested service from NPRC. The Data and Records Input Section was responsible for obtaining necessary information and documents from sources outside the Center. The Records Recovery and Reconstruction Section was set up to search the Center's organizational records in order to supplement destroyed military jackets.¹⁶

Later, in 1975, the Records Input and Reconstruction Branch became simply the Records Reconstruction Branch. The Records Recovery and Reconstruction Section in that branch was redesignated the Reconstruction Section, a sure sign that basic recovery was accomplished and only the job of reconstruction of military service data remained. Additionally, a much needed Correspondence Section was added to the Reconstruction Branch.¹⁷ Previously, the correspondence sections in the various military reference branches answered requests for records involved in the fire with the documents and information supplied by Records Input and Reconstruction Branch personnel. But this seemed to cause a work slowdown in answering "normal" requests, as well as fire-related records requests. With the creation of the Reconstruction Branch Correspondence Section, personnel became specialists in using alternate source documents and information when providing requesters with information. By July of 1976 the Reconstruction Branch, in all its sections, had over one hundred employees.¹⁸

The Records Reconstruction Branch today, after some additional changes, is made up of two Correspondence Sections, each with two units, and a Search and Control Section. The latter is responsible for utilizing the auxiliary records collections necessary to reconstruct military records, accessioning and deleting fire-related records into and from the Center's Registry System, routing reference service requests and outside-source information actions, and controlling branch statistical information.¹⁹

One important aspect of the reconstruction effort was the establishment of a computer index for all recovered and reconstructed records. After records were dried and ready to be refiled, they were punched into a "B" registry system.²⁰ These were then stored in the "B" file, a special temperature- controlled area set up to protect the damaged records. Later, when a missing record was reconstructed, it too was given the "B" prefix and accessioned into the "B" registry system. Since April 1974, all newly reconstructed records are now placed into an "R" registry file and stored in an area separate from the "B" file.²¹

The reconstruction effort obviously had and still has to rely on alternate sources. Some of the more important ones are: Veterans Administration (VA) claims files, the files of individual states, the Registration and Classification Records of the Selective Service System (SSS), Government Accounting Office (GAO) pay records, medical records from military hospitals, entrance and separation x-rays, and organization records. During and after the fire successful efforts were made to locate alternate sources. Making such sources usable involved efforts such as the transfer of records, screening projects, a computer hook-up into the VA Beneficiary Identification and Records Locator Subsystem

(BIRLS), and a large expenditure of man-hours. Most auxiliary military records located at NPRC are computer indexed as "QM" files. NPRC personnel were innovative in attempting to fill in the gaps created by the fire. The cooperation of others in numerous offices, federal, state, and local, was a tremendous help in providing information needed by requesters.²²

As alternate sources have been identified, granted access to and/or accessioned into the Center, the reconstruction action has been greatly speeded up. Significantly fewer personnel are assigned to the Records Reconstruction Branch today. Most valuable sources of alternate information have probably been located. As the Center may now very well be in its peak period of World War II requests, the work of the Records Reconstruction Branch will continue to decrease as time goes on.²³

NARS-5

A computerized system controls and regulates all NPRC record groups. Beginning in late 1975 and early 1976 the contents of the Center were inventoried and data prepared for input into an Automated System for the Control of Federal Records Centers. More commonly known as NARS-5, the Office of Federal Records Centers administers this system. Locally, terminal access points at each building are tied into the main computer serviced by the St. Louis Data Systems Center.

The NARS-5 system was designed to document and control the retirement, processing, storage, and servicing of records held in records centers. This system not only provides for an orderly accessioning and subsequent retrieval of records, but also facilitates timely reviews and descriptions, and provides various statistical profiles of record holdings.¹ Based on data stored in the master file, the NARS-5 system has the capability to produce various internal use reports.

Of these reports, some will be produced on a regular basis while others only upon special request. The printed version will appear in either a list format or on preprinted forms. Reports may be selected by Federal Records Center code, type of action, and/or action code, record group and accession number, beginning location, disposal date, series description, freeze code, GAO code, disposal authority, or building code.² The emphasis had become cost-effective control and planning for the management of large and diverse record groups.

CHANGING WORK FORCE

Executive Order 11478, as amended, of August 8, 1969, reads, in part: "It is the policy of the Government of the United States to provide equal opportunity in Federal employment for all persons, to prohibit discrimination in employment because of race, color, religion, sex or national origin, and to promote the full realization of equal employment opportunity through a continuing affirmative program in each executive department and agency..." The Equal Employment Opportunity Act of 1972 (Public Law 92-261, Section 717) brings federal agencies and employees under the Civil Rights Act of 1964, as amended. Public Law 93-259 applies protection of the Age Discrimination in Employment Act of 1967 to employees of federal, state and local governments.¹

NPRC has followed the policies of the Government of the United States concerning equal employment opportunity and affirmative action. The make-up of the work force at the Center has changed over the years. Women and minorities now represent a larger segment of the total employee population. In 1972 women filled 51 percent of all full-time permanent positions at the Center. By June of 1981 that share had risen to 63 percent. Minorities occupied 39 percent of all full-time permanent positions in June of 1972. By 1981 minorities made up 40 percent of NPRC's work force. The employment figure for non-minorities decreased 1 percent in this period. Males filled 12 percent fewer positions in 1981 than in 1972.²

The increase in the percentages of GS-9 and higher positions filled by minorities and women has been even more dramatic. In 1972 women occupied only 8 percent of these

upper level jobs. By 1981 women were in 41 percent of these positions. Minorities' percentage rose from 5 percent in 1972 to 23 percent in 1981. The total of GS-9 and above positions in the entire Center grew from 38 in 1972 to 44 in 1981.³

The average grade of female employees increased from 3.80 in 1972 to 4.90 in 1981. The average grade of minorities also increased during this period: from 3.75 to 4.90. The non-minority average grade grew from 4.84 to 5.20. That of males increased from 5.11 to 5.50. The average grade of employees in all categories increased in the nine years from June of 1972 to June of 1981. The 1972 figure was 4.41; it was 5.10 in 1981.⁴

The growth in average grade was highest for minorities. This increase averaged more than a full grade: 1.15. The second largest increase was in the female category. Women gained an average of 1.10 grades. The figure for males was .39 grades. Non-minorities gained an average of .36 grades. The overall Center increase was .69 grades. Thus, Center personnel have enjoyed grade increases over the years.⁵

However, these processes have not been without some controversy. In 1977 the then Archivist of the United States James B. Rhoads responded to concerns expressed by some employees of NPRC regarding equal opportunity at the Center. He appointed a special study team of senior NARS officials to examine the Affirmative Action Program at the St. Louis facility. In October of that year this team, made up of a Hispanic, a black, and a woman, visited NPRC. They held informal interviews and meetings with 66 NPRC employees and key officials of the GSA Region 6 personnel office located in the Page Boulevard building, and also examined personnel and NPRC records relating to the EEO

program. The team issued two reports, the first in January of 1978 and the second on June 22, 1978.⁶

Both reports indicated that there was no evidence that NPRC policies caused or were responsible for discriminatory practices. The June report stated that "The EEO program (at NPRC) has advanced and progressed significantly when measured against its pre-fire posture." It also stated that employees' negative perceptions were the result of "...vexing human relations problems..." caused in part by the division of the work force at two locations, the large size and scope of the Center's operation, limited series and grade opportunities, keen competition, a large workload with much repetitive work, the existence of three unions, and colocation at the Page building with an Army component.⁷

The study team did, however, make several recommendations for improving employee perceptions and rectifying some remaining deficiencies in work force representation. The Archivist discussed these in a speech given at both buildings of NPRC on August 24, 1978, and gave support to specific actions in the areas of management policy, communications, the Spanish Speaking Program, training and development, and review of standard evaluation guides for positions.⁸

In December 1979, Center Director J. D. Kilgore reported to Washington, DC and enumerated the steps taken to follow through with the study team's recommendations. He noted that a recent inspection by the Office of Personnel Management (OPM) had reported improvement in minority and female representation in supervisory positions at

the grade level GS-6 and above.⁹ Acting Archivist James E. O'Neill's reply of January 3, 1980, commented favorably on the progress made at NPRC.¹⁰ The reports of both the NARS study team and the inspection by OPM support the aforementioned statistical evidence which shows a clear-cut, purposeful trend in the equal employment and affirmative action programs at NPRC.

CHANGING WORK LOAD

The overall trend in the total number of people employed at NPRC has been towards a decreasing work force. Add to that a significant increase in the amount of holdings and the number of reference services accomplished, and a real growth in productivity can be seen.

In 1967, 734 staff years were used to service 2,104,147 references from holdings of 1,988,178 cubic feet of records. During 1973, the year of the fire at the Page Boulevard location, 687 staff years were required to complete 2,325,740 individual references into total holdings of 2,726,069 cubic feet.¹

Because of the fire, staffing was increased to facilitate recovery efforts. In 1974, 2,059,010 references were serviced from the Center's holdings of 2,830,301 cubic feet of records. It took 830 staff years to accomplish this work. Staff years used increased to 854 in 1975.²

By 1980 only 691 staff years were required to make 3,061,462 references to holdings of 2,973,910 cubic feet of records. Staffing was approaching the levels it stood at prior to the 1973 crisis. But total holdings stood at an all time high. The number of references was also at a record high. Only the 1976 reference figure is slightly higher. But that year's figure included a transition quarter; the 1976 fiscal year was 15 months long.³

Thus, NPRC personnel have been able to achieve increased productivity. A 1979 study by GSA's Management Evaluation Division states, "It is noteworthy that NPRC has been able to effect appreciable reductions in staffing while at the same time increasing its records holdings as well as the number of reference (information) requests serviced." Today fewer personnel are accomplishing more work. This has been produced at NPRC despite an increased complexity of work over the years, in terms of implementation of the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA), the Privacy Act, and other, newer laws and regulations affecting the duties of the Center.⁴

PRESENT AND FUTURE MISSIONS

The mission of the National Personnel Records Center is to serve the citizens of the United States in the sphere of federal records. This mission is elaborated in an internal memo: "(NPRC is) responsible for the receipt, appraisal, reference and research service, preservation, and the administration of personnel, medical, and organization records pertaining to former members of the U. S. Armed Forces and former members of the Federal Civil Service, and other records selected for retirement on a regional or national basis."¹

NPRC maintains and services these records from the time of their arrival in St. Louis until their ultimate disposition. The Center, as physical custodian, is responsible for every facet of their care, and for providing reference service. This includes important action taken to preserve and protect the records from damage.

The originating agencies are the legal custodians of their records. This distinction is an important one for it means that the agencies set guidelines concerning releasability of information contained in records, within prescribed legal limits. NPRC, as physical custodian only, must conform to acceptable guidelines and restrictions promulgated by the originating agencies.

In FY 1981, 3,227,870 requests for records or information from records were serviced from the two locations of NPRC.² The Center receives requests through the mail, via the telephone and in person. Many requests are received from the originating agencies

for their own records. These agencies retire noncurrent records to records centers for economy reasons. FY 1981 estimates indicate that the cost of storage in agency office space averages \$9.26 per cubic foot. The figure for records center storage is only \$.70 per cubic foot of space.³

Noncurrent records are those which are created by agencies but are no longer needed in the conduct of daily business. Yet these records are still required upon occasion by the originating agencies for legal, administrative, fiscal, or other reasons. The agencies request that NPRC temporarily return the actual record to their offices, send copies of the record, or provide extracted information. Thus, originating agencies constitute a large part of NPRC's customer population.

NPRC is unique among federal records centers in that more than half of the Center's holdings are personnel records. The Center houses nearly one hundred million individual civilian and military personnel records.⁴ A large portion of requests are from individuals who wish information from their records. Often the information is needed for some very important aspect of a person's life. Ex-service members may be seeking veterans benefits or may hope to get college credit for training received while in the service. An individual may be applying for a home loan, need verification of experience for a job application, or desire replacements for lost medals or awards. Former civilian employees often require a transcript of service for employment or other purposes. Some individuals request verification of enrollment in the Civilian Conservation Corp (CCC) in order to attend a reunion or join an alumni group. Former military personnel, their dependents, and former civilian employees need copies of their medical records for their continuing health care.

The above are just a few of the numerous types of requests which are received from individuals for information in their records. NPRC provides an essential service for the large group of citizens whose records are stored in St. Louis. Through this public service NPRC touches millions of lives.

Agencies other than the originators of records also request information from NPRC. Requests from state and local governments, institutions outside of government, and businesses also fall into this third category of requests. Some of the above are "routine users" and are allowed access to certain types of information in personnel records on a routine basis. These are federal agencies such as the Veterans Administration, which has access to records of military personnel in order to serve those veterans involved. Other agencies that are not routine users must have the individual's authorization to receive more than the minimum amount of information available to the general public. State and local governments that might need information for unemployment compensation, employment consideration, or law enforcement activities generally need the individual's authorization before any information is released. Any other institution or business also must have proper authorization before obtaining any information beyond that which is specified as releasable under the Freedom of Information Act. In this way NPRC is further serving the individuals whose records are housed at the Center, and protecting their interests at the same time.

Requests are sometimes received from individuals who wish information from other people's records. The requester may be a historical researcher, relative, lawyer, an individual trying to contact an old service buddy, or someone who wants information for other purposes.

NPRC will not, under any circumstance, release information from any individual's record to an unauthorized person or organization, unless the information is specified as releasable under federal law. Relatives who are next-of-kin or legal guardians may receive information if they furnish proof of the individual's death or incapacity, and their relationship. Courts can subpoena records in some cases. When this occurs NPRC sends notification to the individual's last known address. NPRC does not furnish, since the enactment of the Privacy Act, last known addresses to private individuals or organizations but may, in some instances, forward the requester's letter to that address. Researchers who lack the proper authorization can only receive information which is releasable under the Freedom of Information Act. This applies to all requests from private individuals and organizations, and to those from many government agencies.

The Center occasionally receives requests for information from records that are not part of NPRC's holdings. Whenever possible the requester is referred to the proper agency or institution.

Although the majority of requests fit into the classifications described above, many inquiries are not easily categorized, and some may even border on the eccentric. Nevertheless, all requests must be answered within the context of laws and numerous government regulations. Every effort is made to serve the public by answering each of the many requests received in a timely fashion.

Total holdings at NPRC as of September 1981 were 3,074,064 cubic feet of records. At that time the Winnebago Street facility contained 1,526,724 cubic feet, of which 511,522

cubic feet were civilian personnel records. The Page Boulevard building housed 1,547,340 cubic feet of records. The major portion of these--1,086,750 cubic feet--were military personnel folders and related records.⁵

In 1981 total storage capacity at the Winnebago location was 1,948,384 cubic feet. The total capacity of the building could be increased to 2,043,504 cubic feet by adding shelving in available space. The 1981 capacity of the Page Boulevard location was 1,731,899 cubic feet. One stack area contains double stacked filing cabinets; conversion to shelving would increase capacity to 1,841,316 cubic feet.⁶

NPRC is facing a problem common to all NARS records centers: storage space is quickly running out. Both buildings of NPRC will need additions within the next decade if records continue to arrive in approximately the same quantities as they have in the recent past, or if quantities increase. Records are periodically taken from the NPRC system, guaranteeing some space for new accessions. However, the number of records removed is usually exceeded by the number of records being accessioned. If building additions cannot be financed, NPRC may some day be able to accept only limited accessions. There simply will be no significant room left in the Center in which to store large amounts of new records.

Federal agencies and NARS have developed record schedules which prescribe retention periods and the ultimate disposition of various kinds of government records. Legal, fiscal and agency administrative needs, as well as historical value, are taken into account when retention periods and final dispositions are established. The retention period varies with

need. Some records are only kept for five years; others are made part of the permanent holdings of NARS.

Records which have a retention period of a specific number of years are destroyed when that period has passed unless that type of record is placed under a freeze code. Freeze codes are used only when special circumstances create a need for records to be held beyond their normal retention period. Those records which are designated as permanently valuable are sent to one of the National Archives buildings in the Washington, DC area or to the appropriate regional federal archives. Occasionally record blocks are transferred to another NARS records center before their ultimate disposition.

However, transfers out from NPRC occur very rarely, usually only in small amounts and as a result of appraisal of records as historically valuable. The Center is more likely to receive transfers in when other centers do not have space for large accessions, such as the 85,000 cubic feet of corporate income tax records received from the Mechanicsburg FRC in 1980. The major source of disposable records at NPRC is the IRS tax returns received from the IRS Service Center in Memphis. A significant amount of other scheduled disposal has presently been halted due to current freeze code actions.⁷

One problem with disposal is that it can lead to honeycombing--"The storing of records so that there are many non-contiguous empty shelf spaces, of various sizes, with consequently poorer utilization of storage equipment."⁸ This can occur when accessions do not exactly fit into vacated space, leaving sometimes unusable "holes" in stack

shelving. On occasion a large accession simply will not fit into any one block of space left open by a disposal action. One answer to these problems is rewarehousing--a costly process. A new computer program is being developed for NARS which is designed, in part, to allow the arrangement of accessions with similar retention periods next to each other in the stacks. The resulting disposal will leave large blocks of open shelving. This system is known as the Space Information System (SIS).⁹

Another very important reason why NPRC does not gain great amounts of space from disposal of its holdings is that the majority of records in the Center are individual personnel records. These kinds of records are either not eligible for disposal for some time, or are not currently scheduled for destruction at all.

Official Personnel Folders (OPF's) of separated civilian federal employees are eligible for destruction 75 years after an individual's birth or 60 years after the date of the earliest document in the folder if the birth date is not known, as long as the employee has been separated for at least 5 years. Only a small number of these records have become eligible for destruction as yet. It will be some years before any sizable amount of destruction can be realized from this record block. The reason for this situation is that the federal work force did not expand greatly until the late 1930's and following the onset of World War II.¹⁰

There are more than a million cubic feet of personnel records of former military service members at NPRC. Approximately 30,000 cubic feet are received at the Center each year. Unlike civilian personnel folders, these have never been scheduled.¹¹

There has been a formal proposal by the Department of the Air Force that its military personnel files be destroyed 75 years from the date of retirement to NPRC. Under this proposal records of individuals of unusual prominence or special interest and all service records for individuals above the rank of colonel would be permanently held for their historical value. A representative sampling of other service personnel would also be selected for permanent retention. The Veterans Administration has given its support to this proposed scheduling of Air Force personnel records.¹²

Proponents of the scheduling of records of military personnel from all service branches feel that all primary purposes would be satisfied 75 years after retirement to NPRC. Historical needs would be met by those records selected for permanent retention.¹³

If enacted, the scheduling of military records for disposal would eventually provide NPRC with much needed space and would save the government a good deal of money. However, the issue is somewhat controversial. Genealogists, in particular, have resisted the idea. And, even if put into effect, any sizable disposal would be so many years in the future that the action will not help NPRC's immediate space needs.¹⁴

The space problem is one of the challenges that faces the National Personnel Records Center. As with challenges of the past, it will be met.

CONCLUSION

The National Personnel Records Center has played a historic role in the development of the federal government's records management program. This unique Center and its antecedent agencies have brought together, in one place, millions of separated civilian and military personnel records previously scattered around the world. Representative of the idea that records should be housed in and serviced by one administrative unit, this concept provided a more efficient means of record storage, and reduced duplication of files and facilities.

Translated into human terms, NPRC has touched the lives of innumerable citizens by servicing the records of the former military and civilian employees of the United States government. The information contained in these records is often essential to the people whose records are housed at NPRC. It is needed for very important aspects of their lives: veterans benefits, home loans, employment opportunities, retirement benefits, school credits, continuing health care of the former personnel and their dependents, and many others. By servicing requests for information and records in an efficient, timely and correct manner this Center has aided citizens and others in obtaining their legal entitlements.

APPENDIX*

World War I generated a great number of personnel records. As the records flowed into the Adjutant General's Office it became necessary to distinguish between those newly created records and those that had been accumulating since the Civil War. The date chosen, November 1, 1912, marked the beginning of the seven year enlistment. All enlistees on that date were still in service when World War I officially began on April 6, 1917. Records continued to be added to this group until 1939.

With the coming of World War II large amounts of personnel records would again be created, and eventually require storage space. This necessitated another records group. The date of the President's proclamation of a limited National emergency, September 8, 1939, served as the starting date. This group continued to expand until December 31, 1946, the ending date for the World War II records group.

*Grace F. Pennell, Monograph on Military Personnel and Related Records of the War Department, 1912-1939, July 1966, p.v, RG064, NPRC(MPR).

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2. J. D. Kilgore, former Director, NPRC (Speech given upon the celebration of the 30th anniversary of GSA, at NPRC, 9700 Page Boulevard, on July 12, 1979), p. 8; NPRC Workforce Profile chart (prepared by Management and Technical Staff, 1981).
3. J. D. Kilgore (Speech given on July 12, 1979), p. 8; NPRC Workforce Profile chart.
4. NPRC Workforce Profile chart.
5. Ibid.
6. Gilbert Dorame, Jane Hudson, and Wendell Evans, "Final Report: National Personnel Records Center EEO Program Evaluation," June 22, 1978, p. 1, RG 064, NPRC (MPR); James B. Rhoads (Speech given at NPRC on August 24, 1978), p. 1-2.
7. Dorame, Hudson, and Evans, p. 1-2.
8. Rhoads (Speech given on August 24, 1978), p. 2-3.
9. Letter from J. D. Kilgore to Archivist of the United States, December 21, 1979, NARS Special Study Team Evaluation: NPRC EEO Affirmative Action Plan File 75B1, RG 064, NPRC (MPR).
10. Letter from James E. O'Neill to Director, NPRC, January 3, 1980, NARS Special Study Team Evaluation: NPRC EEO Affirmative Action Plan File 75B1, RG 064, NPRC (MPR).

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1. "A Management Study to Determine the Optimal Organizational Location of the National Personnel Records Center, St. Louis, Missouri" (Conducted by GSA, Management Evaluation Division, October 1979), app. 4, NPRC Reorganization File 9C4, RG 064, NPRC (CPR).
2. Ibid.

3. NPRC Holdings, References, and Staff Years Used chart (Prepared by Management and Technical Staff, 1981).
4. "A Management Study to Determine the Optimal Organizational Location of NPRC," p. 3-2.

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2. GSA Forms 433, Statistical Summary for Federal Records Center, September 25, 1981, RG 064, NPRC (MPR).
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6. NPRC (MPR) Space Projection Chart (Prepared by Military Operations Branch, 1980); Interview with John Carver, Chief, Civilian Operations Branch, NPRC, at NPRC (CPR), April, and November, 1981; GSA Forms 433, September, 1981.
7. Telephone conversations with Jean Deken, Chief, Accession and Disposal Section, NPRC (CPR), November, 1981; conversations with Tom Helfrich, Chief, Military Operations Branch, NPRC, at NPRC (MPR), November 1981.
8. NAR P 1864.1A, January 6, 1975, Appendix 1-B, p. 8.
9. Conversation with Tom Nehrkorn, Computer Programmer/Analyst, St. Louis Data Systems Division, GSA, in that Division's offices, November 1981.
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11. Jerry Wallace, "Appraisal and Disposition of Military Personnel Records," (Lecture given in Introduction to Archives Administration course, National Archives building, March 12, 1981).
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