

RUTGERS, THE STATE UNIVERSITY OF NEW JERSEY

NEW BRUNSWICK

AN INTERVIEW WITH RONALD BECKER

FOR THE

RUTGERS ORAL HISTORY ARCHIVES

INTERVIEW CONDUCTED BY

SHAUN ILLINGWORTH

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TRANSCRIPT BY

SHAUN ILLINGWORTH

Shaun Illingworth: This begins the second oral history interview with Ronald Becker, Professor *Emeritus* at Rutgers University, with Shaun Illingworth on September 19, 2022. Thank you very much for joining me again.

Last time, we spoke about your years at Duke during the time of the Vietnam War and the Civil Rights Movement, which were both very influential on your life, as well as discovering (or, I guess, reinforcing) your love of history and maybe even starting to think about library and archives as a possible field. What brought you to Rutgers initially?

Ronald Becker: I think it was the state university of my state, my home state. I'd been away from my family for a while and wanted to be a little bit closer. As I might've mentioned before, my parents were more elderly than most. My father was over fifty when I was born. So, you can imagine I wanted to be a little bit closer to them. The price was right; I got financial assistance and all that.

I still wasn't exactly sure what I wanted to do for a living, ultimately, but I figured, "As long as I'm not drafted and all that, we'll do some graduate work and see where that leads me." That's how I ended up at Rutgers to begin with, not knowing that I would be there for so long, with just a tiny, little break, for my career.

SI: First, you came for a master's in history.

RB: Right.

SI: Tell me a little bit about that period. What was your focus?

RB: Yes, it was an interesting period. I was really caught up in sort of the new wave of social history, that history was not just the history of "the great men" and all of that. I really was enthralled, in my undergraduate years, of being able to read diaries and letters and things like that. So, I really wanted to take a course of study where I would be able to do that, be able to do some research that way, not just looking at government documents and things like that, although I did plenty of that as well. So, I got into that.

There were a number of professors at Rutgers that I became fairly close to and just really enjoyed the time there. It's very strange--very unusual--for people to aspire to be an archivist from early in life. Now, today, you have more of that, because there are educational programs. There's not something that specifically, at that point, taught you how to be an archivist. You definitely had to do it by the seat of your pants, but I thought getting a library degree would be helpful. So, I did that, too, and went from there.

SI: You got the master's, and then, went right into the MLS.

RB: Pretty much, yes, right, and working on the side during that time.

SI: At that time, when you say you were working, you were at Special Collections.

RB: Right, and really, really enjoying that. That was the first real immersion, where I got to really spend time on the other side, being able to work with researchers. So, that was definitely an important period.

SI: Do any professors, from either the master's in history or the MLS period, stand out in your memory?

RB: Yes, yes. I think I mentioned before that I got to meet people, like I met several people at Livingston. I had a little bit of an assistantship, where I was helping out at Livingston College, which was a very unique place at that time. It was fairly new in Livingston's existence.

I remember Seth Scheiner and Jack Gillis (John Gillis) from there. They were very influential. They became good friends, too, and we stayed in touch for quite a while. In fact, I gave the eulogy at Seth's funeral. So, they stand out, and Harold Poor and Phil Grevin, people that were doing research in social and intellectual history, cultural history. It was very much like a family.

Warren Susman, of course, I still remember taking a course with him. We would meet in his office. It was a small group. We'd go well into the night, where we couldn't even see each other, never bothered turning on the lights. We occasionally met at his home. That was another influence.

Of course, I got to know Richard [P.] McCormick very well. In fact, he was my first customer when I was left alone in Special Collections, and [I] was a little stunned that things were so casual, that he could just walk back to the stacks. We codified the rules a little bit more since then, but he actually taught me where things were.

I got left alone there one day as a graduate student. The people were at meetings or whatever-- suddenly, I had to know where things were. So, I got to know him quite well.

[Editor's Note: Richard P. McCormick, RC '38, GSNB '40, enjoyed a distinguished career at Rutgers as a Professor of History, University Historian, Dean of Rutgers College and a scholar of New Jersey history, Rutgers history and US political history.]

SI: When you were going through the Library School, it was before any kind of archival training was available, but was there anybody who kind of focused on archives?

RB: Yes, there were, not exactly archives, but I took every course I could in sort of like special libraries/special collections. So, I did one in African American history. I can't remember who taught it, but I think he was involved at the Schomburg Collection [Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture] at New York Public Library.

For our big project, we went into New York, once a week, in addition to going to class, to catalog a tremendous collection of a collector in Harlem, a private collection, which he was going to donate to the Schomburg eventually. So, I got to be immersed in some really rare materials and he had manuscript material there as well.

Then, Patricia Reeling, it was early in her career--she taught the government documents course. I was really happy to take that course, to really understand how they worked and how to do research in public documents, especially federal documents course. So, that was quite worthwhile.

In fact, just an anecdote, many years later, Special Collections was the only one that had professional staffing on Saturdays. So, when I worked on Saturdays, people would just come into Special Collections, "I can't find this, I can't find that," because there was nobody on duty anywhere else. So, that training in sort of more general librarianship and learning how to use documents definitely helped out.

They're the ones that I remember the most. Most of the classes were fairly small, in both history and in library science. I remember, there was one real big class in library science. It was sort of like the general "how to manage." I never liked that very much.

In fact, it's ironic that one of my colleagues at the New Jersey Historical Society, turned out that he was in the same class as I was and we never even knew each other. There were so many people in the class that we never even ran into each other. It was Richard McKinstry, who later became the head librarian at the Winterthur and had a great career there. We're still in touch.

SI: What year did you finish the master's and the MLS?

RB: I think I was finished with both of them by 1973, right, because I began working that year, too, at the New Jersey Historical Society. I spent, oh, maybe a year-and-a-half to two years there. I was their cataloger/bibliographer.

That was good training as well. That's where I really got immersed in the New Jersey history community, got to meet the people that were running the Historical Commission, the other big collections, the State Archives, what-have-you.

So, it was a good time, but I think they always wanted me to come back to Rutgers. Ultimately, when the assistant curator position came up, I guess I was recruited for it--I don't remember really applying. I remember coming for an interview. Things were a lot less [bureaucratic]--things were much, much simpler then, hiring and all of that. Rutgers was not nearly as cumbersome, that the procedures were not like they are today, for sure.

So, I came back to Rutgers, I think in the middle of '74, July of '74. I was working at the New Jersey Historical Society as I was getting the MLS degree and all of that.

SI: Tell me about what stands out about that period in the study of New Jersey history. From what I understand, New Jersey was not quite as advanced as other states in local history, but not as bad as others. How did you find it when you got there?

RB: Especially historic preservation, New Jersey was certainly not funding history very well during that time. It took me awhile to just get the lay of the land and to understand all of that--I'm trying to think of how I should go about with this.

New Jersey history, at that time, basically consisted of the collection at Rutgers, the New Jersey Historical Society and the State Archives. There were other small collections, but people didn't know where anything was, that type of thing.

So, the Historical Commission was just getting going at that point. Bernard Bush was their first director. One of the first things they did--and I believe Mary Murrin was the author--they did a publication on where manuscript holdings [were] in all the repositories in New Jersey. I think she spent a couple years just traveling through the state--so, the local historical societies, the county historical societies, just basically went all over--did just kind of a general guide to give us an idea what was where.

Then, Bill Wright, who eventually became the State Archivist, he and Paul Stellhorn, another colleague that I was very close to, did a directory of New Jersey newspapers, so [that] we would know where all the newspapers were. There was some microfilming that was going on, but it was way before the digital age, of course.

That was really helpful, but, in terms of funding, we had to do a lot of lobbying for that, that's for sure. It seemed like every time there was a new administration in Trenton, they had to be reeducated all over again as to the importance of [historic sites and archives] and that our history was basically crumbling.

The biggest effort before my time was in the 1960s, during the Bicentennial [Tricentennial] of New Jersey. They put out a series, a series of little blue books that I think Van Nostrand published. So, there's one on labor in New Jersey, on voting in New Jersey, just every [subject], the early history of New Jersey, industrial history of New Jersey. Historians were hired for each one. So, I know Richard McCormick did one, Miriam Studley did one. They wrote probably about twenty-five of them.

[Editor's Note: Van Nostrand published The New Jersey Historical Series in 1965.]

What we did, during the 250th [350th] there, the later anniversary, a few years ago, was, we had them all digitized. So, that was really sort of the basis--at least an effort by the whole state. There were many people studying it and doing things, but pretty much on their own. The Historical Commission helped put it all together with their programs. They eventually got better funding. The historical community really worked together.

From one point on (I can't remember the exact year), but I would go to the Legislative hearings, both the Senate and the Assembly hearings, to speak out for New Jersey history. I kind of became a spokesperson. I think if you Google me now, you'll see some of my testimony. They actually recorded all that and put it on there.

Then, ultimately, more recently, there was a new tax, a hotel/motel tax, that was going to cover history and culture and all sorts of things. The State Museum would get money, we [Rutgers Special Collections] would get money, the Historical Commission would get more money to dole

out to other places. That was fine for a year or two. Then, the money basically got taken away and it turned into a big fight.

Jeff Van Drew was a legislator--I think he's a Congressman now--way down in South Jersey, my old district from my youth. When he saw what we were doing, we were lobbying [for] there, he actually introduced what was called a "poison pill act" for us. That was, if a tax that is voted on by the people--and this was a referendum that started that tax--if that is not used for the original purpose that it was originally intended for, it goes away. So, it can't be just thrown into the general fund, which is what they were threatening to do.

[Editor's Note: Jeff Van Drew served as an Assemblyman for the 1st District in the New Jersey General Assembly from 2002 to 2008, then, in the New Jersey Senate from 2008 to 2018. In 2019, he took office as Congressman for New Jersey's 2nd District in the US House of Representatives.]

That was the original bill. It didn't get passed that way. It got passed with a very small percentage--if it is more than, say, twenty percent of it is used. So, I think we got to keep about twenty percent, but they did pass that and at least that saved that. So, there is a steady stream of state funding now for the Historical Commission, the State Archives, and other programs. Then, they re-grant money.

I was on many, many committees over the years, but, among other things, I chaired the Middlesex County Cultural & Heritage Commission for decades. We got money from the Historical Commission to then pass through to our own grant applicants. The county, I understand, has really further come through now. Middlesex County, I think, is a real model. They have now put in a lot of their own money to supplement the Historical Commission money.

New Jersey's still very far behind when it comes to historic preservation. We certainly have let our historic sites kind of go down the tubes in many cases. Hopefully, that's [changing]. Not having been there now in a few years, I'm not a hundred percent up to what's going on in terms of historic preservation, but I know the Historical Commission is alive and well.

Still, the grant program is alive and well. We take advantage of that at Rutgers as well. We get General Operating Support and Project Grants through them. I believe that the oral history project does, too, I hope.

SI: Yes, thank you for your part. [laughter] Going back, you came to Special Collections as a full-time employee in 1974. What was Special Collections like then? What was its size, how many people worked there, stuff like that?

RB: Right. We had tremendous collections. I mean, it was really one of the best regional history collections I had ever seen. As it turns out, it is one of the best, one of the biggest and finest regional collections, history collections, in the country--but it was very short on staffing.

There was the head of the collection, who basically founded it, Donald Sinclair. He was a World War II veteran. Almost immediately after he got off the boat, they hired him at Rutgers--again,

very informal. He really built up that collection from that point on. There were two professional assistants, myself and Clark Beck, at the time. I'm still in touch with Clark, who lives in Puerto Rico now. Hopefully, the hurricane that just hit [Hurricane Earl] didn't affect him too much.

There was an assistant, Kay Lionikis was her name. She was a celebrity in her own right. She was one of the barnstorming female baseball players during the war, during that time, lots of memories. Her name's in the Baseball Hall of Fame. I actually made a trip up to Cooperstown to see that. She was with us for quite a while.

Then, the University Archives, at that time, was separate. Bill Miller was the University Archivist and he had an assistant. That was basically it, although we worked together very closely. We were brought together very shortly after that.

It wasn't until, I believe, Hendrik Edelman became the University Librarian, Hank Edelman, that we were finally able to get more support in terms of personnel. It all started out with, basically, needing more people for special projects, like I needed somebody to help me.

[Editor's Note: Hendrik Edelman became the Rutgers University Librarian in 1978.]

We were trying to get a really big grant, a big NEH [National Endowment for the Humanities] challenge grant, I think is what started it. We really needed help. So, he gave us somebody who was working somewhere else. I don't think we were the most popular people in the rest of the Library when he was pulling people out of other places to have us work [with them].

Some of these positions became permanent. That's how we got our New Jersey bibliographer, the person that buys our books for New Jersey and collects (builds up) that collection, the printed collection, and many other positions. We're still nowhere near at least as staffed as most of our Big Ten colleagues, but at least that was the period of big growth. Probably, I remember, Edelman came, I think it was around 1978, that he came to Rutgers. He was there maybe a little short of a decade.

A lot of our public programs started then. Instead of just doing exhibits, we started to do exhibit openings and having speakers. We started speaker programs and things like that. So, we became much more attuned to the [public facing elements]. People knew a lot more about us through a lot of the programs that he helped us initiate by funding them.

Just an example, when we got [the Harrison Williams papers](#), which is still one of our most important papers--Senator Harrison Williams, among other things, was the Chair of the Labor and Human Resources Committee in the Senate during the entire Great Society period. He was Lyndon Johnson's pretty much right-hand man in the Senate, was able to get all that legislation passed through making deals with his colleagues, both Democrats and Republicans. Life was a little different then, at least for that period.

We were overwhelmed because he left office very suddenly. People might recall that he was caught up in the Abscam scandal and was given one week to get out of his office. Suddenly, we had thousands of cartons of material that we had to take. We put them in a storage facility.

[Editor's Note: Harrison A. "Pete" Williams, Jr. (1919-2001), a Democrat, served as a Representative from New Jersey in the US House of Representatives from 1953 to 1957 and the US Senate from 1959 to 1982. Williams resigned from the Senate after being convicted for taking bribes during the FBI's Abscam sting operation in the early 1980s.]

There was no way I could go through them on my own. So, I went to Hank and he said, "Well, who would you like?" We had had a student assistant who was then hired at the Livingston Library. (It was called the Kilmer Library at the time.) I said, "Gee, I would love to have him for a couple days a week." Sure enough, he made a phone call to the director of that library. [laughter] I had to apologize to her later on, because I had no idea he was going to do that.

So, again, we got lots of support for that. Also, during my tenure, we began to apply for large grants. There were some great programs then. There was the Title 2C Program that the federal government ran, Department of Higher Education. We got lots of six-figure grants to be able to process some of our really big collections and make them available.

Just collecting something is one thing; making it available to the public is something else, going through it. Like, even in Williams' case, we just took everything, including what really was not relevant for historical research. You've got to go through it and pare it down. We call it archival appraisal. So, that was that.

Our staff grew. We were able to get lots of temporary staff through these grant programs. We got a few NEH grants, certainly several NHPRC [National Historical Publications and Records Commission] grants. We even got one of the "Save America's Treasures" grants [from the National Park Service], I think during the Clinton Administration.

So, collections like [the Roebling Collection](#), the builder of the Brooklyn Bridge, ran the big wire [factory], we have their family papers and personal papers and scientific papers. That was a federal grant to make that available--lots of collections of unique communities in New Jersey, [the Modern School](#) and there were anarchist communities, single-tax communities, what-have-you. A lot of those collections, we bundled them together and got a grant to work on that.

[The International Union of Electrical Workers](#), that's a very big, often-used collection that we have at Rutgers as well--again, documenting tremendous social history in every case, social and political, cultural history. Again, if it wasn't for federal funding or other grants, it would be almost impossible to make those readily available.

SI: I want to ask a little bit about how the collections come in, because they cover a wide swath of fields. You just mentioned labor and industry, social and cultural history. How do you decide what you want to go after, or does it happen the other way, where you hear something is available and you make a case for it to come to Rutgers?

RB: Right, yes. See, first and foremost, we are a New Jersey history collection. Of course, many things happened in New Jersey. New Jersey is a pioneering state in many ways. So, let me give you an example--[Consumers' Research](#), which was the organization that existed before



Consumer Reports/Consumers Union, was headquartered in New Jersey. It was in a rural area in Washington, New Jersey.

The reason that it ended up in such a rural, out-of-the-way place was that, basically, investigating products, doing product testing, telling the public that some things might not be safe, what the manufacturer tells you might not be the truth and all that, that was a really radical thing. They were in New York City. They were accused of all sorts of things, of being anarchists, of being bombers. The heat was just too high. They had to get out of there.

So, they ended up in a very rural area--Washington, New Jersey, is in Warren County; it's in the northwest corner of the state--at that time especially, in the 1910s or early '20s, whenever they ended up out there.

They started doing product testing. As things were invented--electrical appliances, you name it, cars, everything--these were the first big descriptions of these. They would test them. We've got all the testing records. Plus, they had committees that worked on safety, food safety, product safety. It was a huge collection.

We found out about it. It was just daunting. I didn't want to take it. It was going to be our first big dip into consumer history, but, of course, I knew the value of it. I knew it had to be saved. So, I tried to shop it around with them when we found out that, in fact, it was in danger of being destroyed. Cornell University had a big consumer collection. They came down to look at it--it just was too much. So, I decided, "All right, I'm going to take it." We put it in a warehouse.

"What am I going to do with this? Is this an ethical thing to do?" to get a big collection like that. We were not really known for consumer history at that point, although we did have some good New Jersey collections. We had the [Consumers League of New Jersey](#) and we had some private papers as well.

So, I think that was the Title 2C grant. I applied for the big grant. It was my first big grant proposal. I was not really experienced in doing it, but, eventually, I think the second or the third try, we got it. Now, of course, it's an internationally-renowned collection that people come from all over the place to look at. It led to some other consumer-oriented collections, but, again, it all starts with the regional history, with collecting things basically from New Jersey.

There are very few exceptions, for instance, that we have the Griffis Collection, [the William Elliot Griffis Collection](#), which documents the Meiji Period in Japan [1868-1912]. The reason we have that, it was a Rutgers person--William Elliot Griffis went to Rutgers, graduated from Rutgers.

There was a rumor around, which I think is unsubstantiated, that he was the waterboy at the first football game. [laughter] He liked to tell people he was an athlete. I think somebody was saying, "No, he was just a waterboy," but Griffis became a very distinguished cleric. He became a Reformed Church minister, as many of the Rutgers graduates were. He went to Japan as a missionary. Then, later, when he got married, he brought his wife over. I believe he raised some of his children there.

[Editor's Note: On November 6, 1869, Rutgers beat Princeton University in the first college football game.]

He brought back this incredible amount of stuff. He also started the first (probably) exchange program between the United States and Japan anywhere. Rutgers students went over there and Japanese students came to Rutgers. Again, this is during an almost semi-feudal period. It's just when they're coming out of feudalism. So, it was really an incredible thing that he did.

You say, "Gee, why would Rutgers have collections like that?" but that led to other things. We ended up getting Commodore [Matthew C.] Perry's journals, because it fit in so well with what we already had. How these things become available, it turned out a book dealer, Montague Hankin, got those.

There was no way we could afford to pay that price, but it turned out nobody ever purchased it. He knew that Rutgers would've been a good place for it. He left it in his will. When he passed away, they ended up coming to us. So, we get things all sorts of different ways.

Some of them are purchased from dealers and catalogs; some of them, people just know about us and they get offered. We do a lot of work out in the field. We go out there and people know about us being very much involved in the New Jersey history program.

Right, people knew me very well. Of course, they knew Don Sinclair so well. We always encouraged the staff to be involved in New Jersey history activities, to be judges at National History Day in New Jersey and things like that, to just be involved in all of the organizations. I think that's what really attracts material to us.

We have a big women's history collection, women in New Jersey. The labor collection, we have the IUE Papers and others. We do subject guides, which are all on the Internet now, to all the collections. So, there's a guide to our [labor history materials](#), [our African American history materials](#), [women's history](#).

So, that attracts new collections as well. Not only does it attract people to use the collections, which is what ultimately is the reason to do it, but it also brings collections in. I hope that's helpful.

SI: Absolutely. I'll probably ask for more anecdotes about different collections as they come to your mind. One thing I skipped over, in [your interview for the MARAC series](#), you talked about the summer-long course in archival studies in Ohio.

RB: Right.

SI: Tell me a little bit about it, because it has relevance for both interviews, obviously.

RB: Absolutely, because, again, when we started out, I like to tell people--like, I'd go on career days and I also spoke to, I guess it was the senior history majors and first-year graduate students,

for many years, about other careers. I was part of a panel. I used to tell people, "When I got started, there were many, many jobs available, because of the social history revolution and all that, but no training. Now, there's an incredible amount of training and no jobs." [laughter]

At least I hope things are better now. So, the only places that you could get formal training--I knew I really wanted to get into this at the time--were summer programs. There were two of them at the time. One was at the National Archives. I had a little predilection against [theirs]. I didn't really want to get into formal archives, the government archives and that type of thing.

The other had more of a manuscript bent. That was sponsored by the Ohio Historical Society, which is one of the real model historical societies at that time. The Midwestern historical societies are public, as opposed to the [East Coast]. They're newer than the ones in the Northeast, which are all private. They started much earlier, under private auspices.

So, the State of Ohio ran that and funded it really well at the time (not so much now), and it really was an ideal historical society. They started this program and I think I was probably in the second year of the program. It didn't exist for very long, but I got to meet many people at that time. I remember more, I think, the colleagues that I met from all over the country, really, at that time, than the courses. I probably can't tell you any of them. [laughter]

It was pretty quick, but we did spend a very hot summer in Columbus. We had one field trip. We went to Cleveland, to Western Reserve Historical Society. I remember being much more impressed with Cleveland than with Columbus.

It was during the Woody Hayes era of being the [Ohio State University] football coach. You'd get--this is the state capitol--on the front page of every paper was which player got hurt during summer practice, which one was doing well, which one wasn't, just football-mania.

I really enjoyed getting that training. I was convinced, after that, that this is what I really want to do. So, that's what got me started.

We also started to speak about--the Society of American Archivists was meeting in Columbus. I had never been to any of their meetings, but, from what I understood from some of the people that I was in this class with, was that you really don't have many practical sessions there. They're really for people who are administrators and all that.

We needed something, in each region, that could really teach us how to be archivists, because not all of us could spend the whole summer doing this, because you have to take a leave of absence from your job. Chances are you're not going to get paid while you're doing that.

That's how the Mid-Atlantic Regional Archives Conference [(MARAC)] came into being, as well as many of the other regional conferences. They all started around the same time, the Mid-Atlantic one, the New England one, the Midwest one, and several others, Southeast, archivists started at that time.

I still remember the first meeting well, in Wilmington, Delaware. Let's see, it had its fiftieth anniversary, so, I guess I did that in 1972. So, it would've been the Fall of '72--really, really practical sessions, how to do this, how to do that, and how to do things on a dime, on a shoestring, without funding. So, it really took off from there.

That was probably my biggest sort of commitment that I made to an archival organization. Almost every capacity you could serve in there, I was there. I was on their Steering Committee, I was on the Local Arrangements Committee, the Program Committee, chair of that, then, ended up chairing the whole organization, then, became the bulletin editor for at least a decade. So, I really turned in a lot of time with them. That was really my [interest], much more so than the national organization.

SI: You described the relationship between SAA and MARAC, the regional groups, in the other interview. Were there any other groups that had an archival caucus, like ALA?

RB: The New Jersey Library Association had what they called a history and bibliography section, and I think they put on a program once. I didn't get very much involved in it, but a number of my colleagues did. I attended some of those programs.

The American Library Association itself, the national organization, didn't have very much, although I did attend one ALA meeting. We won an award [in 1995]. They have a labor history award, the John Sessions Award, to the outstanding labor repository, something like that.

That was during the time that we were making the IUE Collection, which is a massive collection, available. The International Union of Electrical Workers is a very important organization. I don't know if you want me to get into some of the details about the collection, but it's a huge collection. Again, you wonder, "What's it doing in New Jersey? What's it doing at Rutgers?"

Well, there was a big connection. There were a lot of electrical plants here. We had (still do) a School of Labor and Management and some of the professors there were close to the IUE leaders. They introduced us to them. We decided to become their archival repository--once again, probably not knowing fully what we were going to get into.

The IUE now has been swallowed up by the Communication Workers of America. So, we don't have their current archives, but we have it right through [2000]. The IUE was born out of the UE, the Union of Electrical Workers, which was a Socialist (probably leaning towards Communist) union at that time, very radical union. The IUE was more of kind of a democratic, more mainstream union.

They broke off from the UE, but they did a lot of really important things for the labor movement. The two that I think of the most are that they organized in the South. They were the first big union to organize in the South. You can imagine the resistance that they had there.

In fact, when we did a big exhibit on the IUE (after we got the big grant, we're still in the processing), in the exhibition, there was, I still remember the front page, I believe it was the Jackson, Mississippi daily paper with a picture of the International President of the IUE dancing

with a black woman. Clearly, it was doctored, and saying, "This is what this is going to [lead to]. These people are coming in and doing this to us. This is what is going to happen to us," but they got through it. They did manage to do a lot of really great organizing down there.

They also had a Social Action Committee. So, they did a lot of work in the communities where they were. We had really good documentation of that--but, anyway, we won an award for that. So, I did attend one ALA meeting, American Library Association. It was something. It was in Chicago and it was pretty big. I'd never seen so many librarians in one place in my life.

The Society of American Archivists dwarfed before the ALA, but it wasn't like I gave up on the Society of American Archivists. I'm still a member. I chaired their Regional Activities Committee at one time and I chaired the Manuscript Repository Section and the Congressional Collections Committee. So, I did some work with them, but the most work I did with them was just so that we could heal some of the wounds and teach each other about our organizations.

They had two meetings in our region while I was chair of MARAC. One was in Philadelphia and one was in Washington. We'd end up making them joint meetings, so that people who attended the SAA meeting, which really ran all week, could then--MARAC would start right after SAA ended, in the same hotel, same place.

Your registration fee would be good for both. So, MARAC members could attend SAA for a minuscule fee, for like a very, very small percentage of what SAA would charge. SAA members would not get the same deal--they would get the same deal, because it would be free to go to MARAC--but, of course, they wouldn't be saving as much money.

Ann Morgan Campbell was the Executive Director of the SAA at that time. I remember working with her. Really, I think we healed a lot of wounds from that, knowing that we really can coexist. When MARAC and the other regionals first started, SAA tried to get us to be like junior clubs. They tried to get us into their organization, so that we wouldn't be rivals.

Really, there's plenty to go around for everybody. I think that worked out pretty well. So, it was one contribution that I made to the profession as a whole, outside of our region.

SI: When you came to Rutgers, was it a faculty position right away or did it turn into a faculty position?

RB: It was a faculty position, yes. We had more faculty positions then. There were over a hundred of us, I remember, at that time. I had to do the usual, getting tenure and all that. I think I was an instructor on a one-year contract, which was renewed a couple times, and then, promoted to assistant professor. That was a three-year contract.

Then, I had to get tenure at that time to be promoted. So, I think I got tenure in 1980, and then, was promoted one more time to Professor either ten or fifteen years later.

SI: Was it based on research publications or some other criteria?

RB: Yes, they used to have five criteria. (I think they have three now.) I think scholarship is always the number one. I think it's scholarship, teaching, which, in the library, for librarians, it became something like librarianship, how well you did your job, and service--so, service to your profession, to your community, to the University and all of that.

So, we had over a hundred faculty members then. I think it's been reduced way [much]. It's much, much smaller now. We may have the same number of staff, but there are fewer faculty positions. There have been attempts to challenge faculty status for librarians--not just at Rutgers, but other places--but we stood firm.

Our ranks are definitely diminished now, but the AAUP [American Association of University Professors] has been very helpful. So, I had got very much involved in the AAUP as a grievance counselor. I guess the inner lawyer in me wanted to make sure that people were not oppressed. So, I got involved in that, on that committee, and got to know the University Administration real well through that role.

SI: Tell me a little bit about your research, what areas you got into.

RB: Right. I was interested mostly in compiling guides at first. I didn't really get into issue kinds of publications for a while. So, I did a guide to all of our annual publications, to our periodicals, to the various things I told you about, these types of history.

Then, after a while, I was asked to do some research on--we had, our profession, I guess it was the Society of American Archivists, came up with new ethical guidelines for being an archivist, such as making sure that everybody had equal access. It was a long document.

So, I wrote an article on it, how it applied, and with lots of examples and all that. It was published by a journal called *Provenance*. I actually ended up winning an award for that, like the top article for a certain number of years.

I did that, and then, also, some experiential publications, meaning--we had kind of an ugly experience with the *Partisan Review*, which was kind of a Socialist literary journal. It was a real lesson learned that I thought the community should know. I ended up giving a paper on it--and, I mean, it might've been at an SAA meeting--that I was encouraged to write an article for their journal, for *The American Archivist*, on that, which I did.

SI: That was "A Handshake and a Lawsuit."

RB: I know that it's quoted a lot, because there are a lot of lessons to be learned. So, it's assigned to a lot of classes and all of that. I don't know if you want me to go into some of the details.

SI: A lot of these stories about the collections, it's kind of the story behind the collection.

RB: So, the reason we got the *Partisan Review* archives--again, like, "What is Rutgers doing?" because it was an English journal that came to America--so, Rutgers, well before my time,

basically brought the *Partisan Review* to the campus. I think there were people in the English Department that wanted it to be on campus.

[Editor's Note: *Partisan Review* began publication in 1934 as an organ of the Communist Party USA-affiliated John Reed Club of New York. Initially Communist-oriented, the periodical later shifted to an anti-Stalinist, Social Democratic stance. The magazine moved its operations to Rutgers in 1963, then, moved to Boston University in 1978. Professor Becker's article, "On Deposit: A Handshake and a Lawsuit," appeared in *The American Archivist* (Volume 56) in the Spring of 1993.]

So, it came and the editor came; he got a professorship in the English Department. I believe his assistant editor did as well. Everything was going fine, I guess. We got their archives. There was some really significant material in there. In fact, I spent, oh, an enormous amount of time reporting [on it].

Normally, when describing collections, we describe them on the whole or on the folder level or box level, but these were literary figures. They were important literary figures. So, there's a volume that came out, which I believe is online now, called *American Literary Manuscripts*. So, I literally cataloged that collection one item at a time, and then, reported it to the *Literary Manuscripts*.

So, let's say if you have a [English author Algernon Charles] Swinburne letter (or any well-known author), you would report how many letters you had. So, this guide would say, "Rutgers has twenty-five letters of this author," and Cornell has this and Princeton has that and Penn State has that. So, we'd put a lot of work into this collection.

Everything was going well until the editor, William Phillips, it was time for him to retire. Rutgers had a mandatory retirement age of seventy at that time and he had reached seventy. Rutgers wanted to keep the journal and just make him an *emeritus*. He could still have all the privileges. They had their own house on campus, that Rutgers gave to them--didn't give it to them, but allowed them to use--and everything would be fine.

[Phillips], of course, took umbrage to this. With our not knowing this (and nobody at the University knew), he was negotiating with other places to move, to move over there and get a professorship there and move the journal.

In his negotiations with Boston University, the University Administration was told by my counterpart there, their Special Collections person, that, "They've got a tremendous archive. You should demand that they bring the archives with them, that they don't just move the journal there, but they move the archives." So, Phillips quickly agreed to do that. All of a sudden, they announced that they're moving to Boston University and they're taking their archives with them.

The University reacted very quickly by basically--I think they even called in the police--to make sure that nothing got removed from there. Then, they called me to go in there and see what was there. So, we had the letters, but there were many, many more archives and manuscripts and all

sorts of things that were in the building. He had agreed with Boston University, had a contract, to move the entire archive, what was in the building and what was in our collection at the library.

So, we went back to look at the documentation. As I mentioned before, Rutgers was much, much less formal back then. Richard Schlatter in the English Department, who later became a Provost, was a very high-level administrator at Rutgers, made this deal with William Phillips, years and years before, that they would come over. They called it "a deposit," that the archives would be deposited at the Rutgers Library.

[Editor's Note: Dr. Richard Schlatter, a Professor of History at Rutgers since 1946, served as University Provost and Vice-President from 1962 to 1971.]

Well, this whole trial then, it all hinged on the word "deposit." Deposit has an archival meaning, and we don't use it anymore, but, in my early days and before my time, it was used to mean that you're actually giving the material, you're depositing the material, somewhere. It implied, at least, a change of ownership, but it was a very bad term to use, clearly.

So, Phillips hired a very, very high-level lawyer, Albert Besser, who passed away recently. He was a real flamboyant [litigator]. He was Newark Mayor [Kenneth] Gibson's lawyer when he was indicted. He did that trial, of course, got him off. We had a very inexperienced lawyer.

So, there, we had this lawsuit and we eventually had to go in there. It's the first time I'd ever been in a courtroom up until that time. It was a really harrowing experience, which I didn't even write it--I didn't write those details in the argument--but it all hinged on the word deposit.

I still remember getting grilled by their lawyer. Immediately, I could tell what he was doing, but I was trying my best--I'd never been in a courtroom. I didn't know how to behave. So, I remember him saying something like, "Mr. Becker," and he was really very condescending towards me, like I'm this young guy who is very naïve and doesn't know anything, "do you have a job?" He starts off that way.

I said, "Well, yes, of course, that's why I'm here." "And do you get paid at that job?" As soon as he said that, I knew where he was going, "And how do you get paid?" and I said, "I get a check." This is going [on and on]. This is just ridiculous. I could see exactly where he was going. I'm trying to think in my mind, "How can I outfox this guy?"

So, the next question, of course, is, "What do you do with the check?" So, of course, I immediately said, "I cash it." [laughter] I did not want to use that word. Then, he gets all angry and everything, "And don't you put any of it in the bank, so [that] you can pay your bills?" and this and that.

So, he finally got me to use the word deposit. I'm trying to tell him, I'm trying to say, "It's different," but he cuts me off. He won't let me say anything about the archival use of it. So, things didn't go very well, that's for sure. We were going to lose the case. So, to save face, the University settled.



We were allowed to make a microfilm copy of some of this stuff, but we really couldn't use it. I mean, I didn't want a microfilm copy. As angry as I was with my counterpart at Boston University (still remember his name, even though I've never met him), we sent the stuff over and I sent my guide. I sent the cataloging over with it.

I know I was encouraged to withhold that, to make them do it all over again, but I really couldn't do that. Then, we had to tell *American Literary Manuscripts* that, "Unfortunately, even though we reported this," and it was a published book then, so, you couldn't take it away. Now, it's online. So, they were able to remove it once it came online.

So, basically, it was an article about terminology and why we need to have real deeds of gift, which were very, very informal. Don Sinclair would do anything he could to get a collection. He said whatever the donor wanted to hear to bring it in the door.

After the *Partisan Review* incident, I tried to clean up a lot of these doubtful [areas of ownership], because sometimes in the record, it would say, "This person left this. He gave me this. This was deposited. This was donated," but we didn't have formal deeds of gift. So, we very, very quickly tried to rectify that.

We did lose a collection or two, where I went and called the family and said, "I really want to make this formal," and, instead, they took it back--very rarely. I think maybe there were two incidents of that, but, yes, we had a lot of adventures. So, some of the publications had to do with experiential material, basically a word-to-the-wise kind of thing.

SI: You mentioned that the way Don Sinclair would do things was much more informal. Did you find that you, having a bit more education in what was formal and accepted at that time, was he accepting of what you would bring to the department or did you butt heads over issues?

RB: Yes, he wasn't happy with the way the world was changing. Remember, it wasn't even so much my education, it was that the world had changed. It just wasn't [the same]. In fact, I entitled that article something like, "A Handshake and a Lawsuit," because a handshake used to be what brought a collection to us. Yes, Don definitely did not like the changing world. He did not like computers until he got to use one, until he got to really learn how to use one.

In fact, just a little anecdote, he ended up retiring at sixty-five because the world had just kind of really changed too much, but we remained friends. He used the collection. A lot of the publication work that he did came after his tenure at Rutgers.

He used to always joke that--his birthday was on July 1st--he said, "I'm going to squeeze every penny out of this university I can," because you were forced to retire on the June 30th after your seventieth birthday. "I'm going to get a whole year out of that." [laughter] I think, by the time he retired, the retirement age was no longer enforced, but that was a big thing with William Phillips. I mean, that's the *Partisan Review* thing.

Well, there are all sorts of arguments back and forth. There were some people I knew (even in the History Department) that should have retired well before seventy and ended up staying well

after seventy. I used to preach that, like, "You're killing your field by doing that. You can stay on as an *emeritus*, you can keep doing a lot of the things that you're doing, but, by doing that and not letting young people enter the field, you're putting up a barricade."

SI: You said it was about 1990 when you became Head of Special Collections.

RB: I believe so. There was an interim period. Don retired, let me see, he retired in the early '80s. So, there was an interim period where you were sort of like working by committee. Then, Ruth Simmons, she was the wife of the Dean of the Law School [Peter Simmons]--in fact, I just spoke to her yesterday. Her husband's in bad shape right now. Well, they're both in their nineties. So, she was an interim head during that period.

Then, in 1990, I took over from her, but I was doing a lot of the administering of the [unit] even during Don's time. I mean, Don, for instance, would not do--he didn't believe in formality and paperwork--he wouldn't do annual reports and things like that. So, I was constantly [doing that].

Some of it was like, he would basically say, "Just don't tell me, just do it." He didn't even like the idea of going for grants. He used to call getting grants "welfare." He literally used terms like that. He was a child of the Depression, but just an incredible mentor, through his knowledge, friendship and his being a workaholic.

SI: Yes, I remember him when I was an undergraduate. He was still there working every day.

RB: Right.

SI: I don't know what he was working on.

RB: He might've even been retired by then.

SI: Yes, he was definitely retired, yes.

RB: Yes. I would pick him up and he would be out there. I never had to wait for him. On the coldest days, he'd be standing outside his house, when he couldn't even drive anymore, and be ready to come to work--and never criticized what we're doing, just kept blinders to what was going on.

He didn't like what was going on most of the time, but he stayed out of the fray and had an incredibly productive retirement, an unbelievable retirement, because he never had time to really put all the research he had done into publication until after he retired. Then, he could finally finish up all these projects, of which there were many.

SI: When you became Head of Special Collections, did you have, at that point, an idea of where you wanted to take the department?

RB: Right. I wanted to expand the staff, certainly, and I wanted us to do more public programming and just be more visible to the world. There was always this thing, like, "People

will just come to us." So, I think we had more of a public service bent, I think, after that, that we were out there.

I made sure that people were involved in the history community and the archives/library community and did everything I could to expand the staff. If we would get a really good person, say a grant person, for, say, two years to work on a collection, I would do everything I could to try to get Rutgers to then fund that position when the grant was over, and was successful in a couple places, never completely successful. I mean, we're still nowhere near [fully staffed].

Of course, trying to build up the physical facility--we did a big renovation, expanded a little bit, not enough. We still need our own building, for sure, to keep up, but [I] tried--and, of course, expanding the collections exponentially. There was just so much out there.

As we had more staff, we were able to get more collections, but always chasing funding. I mean, after a while, I definitely became a bureaucrat, [laughter] who was chasing the dollars to make the place work, but made many great connections there.

We got involved with Phone-A-Thon. So, we're even calling parents of students, which was a University-wide effort. We just participated in this big thing. I got everybody on the staff to do that, to work on Phone-A-Thon. We would go to the Rutgers Club, which was on College Avenue then, and they'd give us a meal. Then, we all had phones and they gave us prospects.

Some of our greatest donors, we got from that, just calling them out of the blue. These are prospects that had never donated before, telling them about the Library. One of the endowments we have now is from one of the prospects that we had called. He was an executive at Exxon, is now retired, and just became fascinated with what we did and supported us so well.

Incredibly, his daughter became an archivist directly as a result of that, because he brought his daughter to visit us one day. She was still in high school, I believe. She now has a high-level archival position.

I got to meet a lot of people. I think that was one of the [benefits], got to meet every Governor, our entire Congressional delegation, spending lots of time there, union officials. It was really fascinating.

SI: Going back to the Congressional and Senatorial papers, my understanding is that you kind of have to attract those or make arrangements.

RB: Well, yes and no.

SI: It's not like other papers, where it's assumed they'll go there.

RB: Right, so, the papers of people who serve in the Legislature, both in the state and federal [systems], but I'll concentrate on federal, because they're usually more important. You've heard of the Presidential Papers Act, of course, where the President's papers, the Executive papers, have to be at the National Archives. We've got a huge court case about this stuff.

SI: Yes. We've all been educated. [laughter]

[Editor's Note: The interviewer is referring to the role played by the Presidential Records Act in the various criminal cases against former President Donald Trump, including the search of Trump's home, Mar-a-Lago, the previous month.]

RB: Yes, the Archivist of the United States, who would've known that that person would get embroiled in this? That was Congress [that] voted that in. Congress insisted on it. So, Judicial papers and Executive papers belonged to the country, to the National Archives. However, the Legislature (the Senate and the House of Representatives), they're not going to make their papers public. So, their papers are private property. That becomes a problem, because how do you get the funding to do that?

We were able to solve that problem, but we couldn't take everybody's papers, that's for sure. So, we really concentrated. We tried to get all of the Senators, from [Clifford Case](#) on--and I believe we did--right through [Lautenberg](#). So, we got many of those, and then, key members of the House. There's just no way you could take them all.

[Editor's Note: Clifford P. Case (1904-1982), a Republican, served as a Representative from New Jersey in the US House of Representatives from 1945 to 1953 and the US Senate from 1955 to 1979. Frank R. Lautenberg (1924-2013), a Democrat, served the State of New Jersey in the US Senate from 1982 to 2001. In 2003, he returned to office in the US Senate and served until his death in 2013.]

So, we went after, of course, our local one. That would be the one that represented Middlesex County and the Rutgers area, that we were actually asked to do that by the administration, keep in good graces with them, get their papers and all that, be there, make lots of trips there and get involved with that.

We worked closely with the Rutgers Office of Federal Relations, which had their offices in DC. They would help make connections for us. Then, so, for the members of the House, we would look to see what they did, like what they're known for. Is it something where there won't be a lot of other documentation?

So, for instance, we had the late [Bill Hughes's papers](#). Hughes was Van Drew's predecessor and LoBiondo's predecessor in South Jersey, in that district. I think he was the only Democrat to represent that district in generations, really. So, that was [a factor], and he introduced and had passed much of the gun control legislation that was done during that time--so, known for that.

[Editor's Note: Democrat William J. Hughes (1932-2019), represented the 2nd District in the U.S. House of Representatives from 1975 to 1995. Republican Frank LoBiondo (1946- ) represented the 2nd District from 1995 to 2019.]

So, if you really want to study that, you can come to Rutgers and there'll be a lot on how that all came about. A lot of it, the assault weapons and all that, a lot of that's been rescinded, of course,

since then--as much of the Great Society has--which, in some ways, makes that even more important.

So, that's pretty much how we decided, but, then, you have to come up with funding. It's impossible to get a federal grant for Congressional papers, because they're private. The agencies don't want to support that. So, you can maybe get the state to support it, which we never were able to do, but [Senator] Jacob Javitz's papers were supported. The State of New York essentially paid to have those processed at the university at Stony Brook.

There are other examples of that as well, but the way we were able to get funding was through--there's a law about campaign funding, where, if you don't run for office, let's say you've served for many years, you decide not to run for reelection, but, of course, you have a campaign war chest, that they're constantly raising money. If you think I was raising a lot of money for Special Collections, you can imagine--that's their main job, especially in the House, where they've got to run every two years. I mean, they're constantly campaigning and raising money.

Well, when they finally decide to retire, there might be a big bundle of money there. Unless they donate that money to a charity within a certain amount of time, they have to pay personal income taxes on it. So, of course, they're very much encouraged [to dispose of it].

So, we took advantage of that. I think we were one of the first to take advantage of that, encourage them, "Well, give the money for us, so [that] we can process your papers, or give some of it to us." So, we were able to get quite a bit of it that way.

I remember, [Rush Holt](#), who did it, has got a very good collection. We were able to use unexpended campaign funds to process his papers. He also helped us quite a bit. He organized his own papers, did a tremendous job with that.

So, again, those papers are private property and they become, really, manuscript collections. They're not government papers in any way. Sometimes, it's hard to tell the difference when you look through it. I lobbied for years to try to get Congress to pass a law making them public property, but, of course, they're never going to police themselves. They can burn their papers if they want after they leave.

They don't have to keep them at all, even though their staffs are all paid for with public money and they have big staffs. A tremendous amount of money goes to the Congressional staffing and offices and all of that. So, they're created at public expense, they have to do, of course, with legislation and public service, but they won't--that law will never pass, believe me. [laughter]

For several years, I was able to lobby them to try to get what they call, the nickname is "pork," but it's money that gets sent to districts in private bills and all of that. The University had a competition and the top three were given permission to lobby. So, I did that, and we made the top three, but we were never able to actually get funded.

As a result, I spent quite a bit of time in Washington. I would meet with members of, say, the House Appropriations Committee, and never really was able to get much traction with that. At

that time, at the time that we were doing that, there was a real sort of backlash against that kind of funding. That's where the nickname "pork" came in and all that.

I still remember, I didn't want to drive into DC, so, I would drive to wherever--I can't remember the town in Maryland--for where there was a Metro station.

SI: Like Silver Spring?

RB: No, I think it was New Carrollton. There was a Holiday Inn right near the [station], where I could walk to the place there. One time, I took their shuttle bus to the train station, so [that] I could take the Metro into DC. I was on my way--I was lobbying a Congressman from Wisconsin and someone else there--to try to get them to support our particular bill. It was basically to process Congressional papers. I thought I would have a sympathetic ear with that.

So, anyway, the guy's got the radio playing in this van that's taking me there. They're talking about this backlash, about how all this federal money's being wasted. It was a conservative talk show, I guess. The driver is going on and on. He tells me, as I'm sitting in the back seat, "Anybody who goes to do that stuff should be shot." That's exactly what [the driver said]. [laughter] Of course, I wasn't going for any personal pet project--it was for public service--but I definitely kept my mouth shut.

That was one of the reasons why we were never able to be very successful with that, but the unexpended campaign money was our main source of funding to do that. Again, we had to pick and choose.

I don't think any big collections have come in since I've retired. I think there's been a squeeze. As you know--well, you're at the University now--there've been lots of cutbacks. The Library has suffered quite a bit and Special Collections has as well, positions not being filled. As far as I know, I don't think the University Archivist position's been filled yet. Our University Archivist retired.

SI: Yes, I guess Erika [Gorder] is still acting or interim or something like that.

RB: I think they're going to fill it soon, but all this time. So, they haven't been doing a lot of that big-time collecting.

SI: Part of the major changes to libraries and archives in general has been the technology boom, particularly the Internet, but other forms of technology use as well. Can you tell me a bit about what you see as key moments in the use of technology at Special Collections?

RB: Right. So, I'll give you one example, just to start out with, and sort of the history of it. We were the headquarters for the New Jersey Newspaper Project. It was funded by NEH. We got a big NEH grant. It had many phases. It started out well before the technology age.

It started out with putting on exhibits and getting people to support the collecting of newspapers. So, we did that. Then, we got money to catalog New Jersey newspapers all over the state. The

project staff were headquartered at Rutgers, but we would send them everywhere there were newspapers, all the historical societies, even out of state, where there were New Jersey papers out of state.

Then, there was the microfilming phase, where we got money to microfilm a lot of titles. We microfilmed a really good percentage. It was quite an undertaking, especially to convince repositories that we might have to destroy their papers to microfilm them, because they had bound them.

They used a guillotine. They'd chop off the end, so that when you opened it, you'd have to open them very far to film them flat. Then, you might destroy the paper--but the papers are going to be destroyed anyway because it's newsprint. It's not going to last anyway.

So, we did that project over several years and got funded very well from the federal [government], from the NEH. Then, now, we're in maybe the third year of the digital project. So, now, we're digitizing. We're using the microfilm that we did to digitize papers off the microfilm. So, that's being run now also out of Rutgers.

The microfilming was done at the State Archives. In fact, we started their micrographics [unit]. We got the money to do it. We decided that was the best place to do it. Now, all their filming and digitizing and what-have-you gets done thanks to that newspaper grant that Rutgers ended up getting. Digitizing is so expensive that we can't do nearly all of the microfilm that we have. The microfilm had to be done to very exacting standards and targets had to be put in.

The advantage, of course, of digitizing is, you could do word searches, you could do phrase searches, you could do subject searches, through the papers. So, if you didn't know exactly when something took place, you could still get at it. So, that's going on right now.

That's made a big difference, and all these digital finding aids. Again, it's expensive. So, we're trying to digitize our finding aids more than the collections themselves, although we have done a number of collections--again, very expensive. It needs to be funded.

Rutgers (or really any repository) doesn't have unlimited funding to do that type of thing, but I guess the scary part is that so much is now being created digitally. It's being born digital. So, being able to preserve that is so important, being able to migrate it from one system to another, so that if a system changes, it doesn't get lost.

I've noticed, even using the University Archives as an example, so many of like the newsletters and the things that are put out by various departments and committees and other schools and institutes and what-have-you throughout the University are born digital. If you don't catch them for the Archives, you've lost something.

With the periodicals, we're on the mailing list. They get sent to us; the reports get sent to us. Of course, we have a lot of paper, maybe too much paper. It's a big issue throughout our profession.

A lot of departments will put a newsletter out on their website. Oh, after a year or two, "Oh, we're running out of room. Let's just put the last five issues up," and they get rid of the others. If we don't capture that--it's the University Archives' obligation to capture that--but, if you don't know about it, they're putting it up there and it's not being mailed to you and they're not sending us notices--you can't be everywhere at once.

So, it becomes a pretty big issue, but it's definitely revolutionized the field. If I were starting out now, I would have to be trained a lot differently than I was trained.

SI: You talked a little bit about a renovation, but how has Special Collections changed physically during your tenure there?

RB: Okay. When I first came in--and not all of it's for the good, believe me--when I first came to Rutgers, we had what was called the New Jersey Room. When you walked into the Alexander Library, which is the main library at Rutgers for the social sciences and humanities, right to your right was this New Jersey [Room], this incredible room.

It was three stories high, had a window wall in the back, which we had to buy a big curtain [for], because the sun was kind of just doing too much damage to the room. We were using it as our exhibition room, and then, we stored stuff there, but we immediately turned it into a really nice reading room. That was before the big renovation.

Then, we had the New Jersey Garden right outside, where we would have events. We'd have exhibit openings, public programs. If the weather was nice, we could go right out there. We had a door that led right out there. It was a garden that was like in the shape of New Jersey and it had water in the rivers. We actually had fish in the water, the whole business. We could not get the University to keep it up. It's all gone now with the renovation.

So, that was kind of our hub, our center. We were front and center. Then, the staff was downstairs. We had collections on two levels below. We also had a warehouse, an old warehouse on the Kilmer Campus, which was not really well heated. It was not a good place to store things.

So, we were able to do fundraising to build an annex facility on the Busch Campus, which is still there. It's climate-controlled and all that. I mean, it's had its problems over the years, including a shelving collapse, but we store a lot of material there. We really would love to have an expansion, either our own separate building or a big expansion, so [that] we could bring a lot of it back into the building.

There's a lot of material that gets used a lot that we have to put offsite. So, it would be much better to have more onsite, but it's a problem that many repositories have. We have to use offsite storage.

SI: When you say offsite storage, do you mean the annex itself or with other companies?



RB: Yes, and, also, University Records. Now, there's a big records storage facility, which is very active. They keep current records there, which go into the Archives (some go into the Archives) eventually. Steve Dalina heads that. I think they're on Ethel Road in Piscataway. They're off the campus, but not far.

He's even done some courtesy storage for us, where we didn't have room in other places, but we look for every nook-and-cranny we can find for that. We even have some storage at--what's it called? Is it still called Iron Mountain? I'm not sure, but one of those commercial places.

SI: Iron Mountain, yes.

RB: So, we do keep material in lots of different places and have to move it back and forth. There's wear-and-tear. We have to rehouse some collections because of that.

SI: I like the stories about the collections and how they came about. Are there any other ones that stand out in your memory that we haven't talked about?

RB: Well, there are a number of them. [laughter] Oh, just visiting some of these collections and the like, probably the most stressful situation I had ever been in was when Harrison Williams left office. There was an impeachment trial in the Senate.

I'm a really big fan of his, so, I mean, this is a little prejudicial, but I think he was arrested more for stupidity than any criminal action he could have done. Abscam was a set up and he refused all the money that they offered him. I think it was a bribe to get somebody citizenship, some Arab sheik, on a yacht. They met on a yacht. Finally, I guess they wore him down and he accepted some bogus, I think, certificates of ownership of a mine or something--but, anyway, he was arrested and convicted.

He actually served time in jail. There was an impeachment hearing and he resigned just before the vote. The vote was going to be in the Senate. It was going to be [a landslide]. Daniel Inouye from Hawaii was the only one who was going to [support him], even his friends, because they knew they'd be in trouble at home if they didn't impeach a so-called "criminal."

[Editor's Note: Daniel K. Inouye served as a US Senator from Hawaii from 1963 to 2012.]

So, anyway, he was given one week to get out of Washington. He resigned on a Friday. I got a telephone call. We knew we were going to get his papers someday, but, remember, his nickname was "New Jersey Senator for Life." So, I wasn't going to spend time on something that wasn't going to come to us for a long time.

So, I was told, "You'd better get down to Washington." I didn't even have time to pack anything, I didn't even bring any clothes or anything, didn't even have a toothbrush. I jumped on the first flight, the shuttle flight, down to Washington.

I got to his office and it was just mayhem. There were reporters all around. He was just under so much stress. I got to see people, a lot of the luminaries, Ted Kennedy was hanging around

there, people and all that. I was introduced as the person who was going to get the collection. They were like, "Let's see the Abscam stuff. Let's see it. What do you have to hide about that?"

He was just really under a lot of stress. It was just so hard to see this happen to such a distinguished person. They asked him, like, "Where's the stuff? Where's the good stuff? What do you have to hide?" He said, "I've got nothing to hide." He pulled his desk drawer out and like dumped the stuff on the floor, I still remember, in front of all these reporters.

I was the one that had to clean it up. I saw some really personal things in there that never should've been in any collection, like letters to his wife--first his girlfriend, and then, she later became his wife--that the reporters never should've gotten ahold of. He said, "Here, look at it."

They didn't, thank goodness, but having to spend a week with him under those circumstances, we had one week to get out. It was not only packing up everything in his office--of course, all his staff members were working with me, I mean, everybody we could get to come and help out--not only did we do that, but we had to go in Suitland, Maryland. The members of the delegation, the Congressional delegations, get courtesy storage there.

Suitland, Maryland, is the national Federal Records Center. They keep the records of the various committees of Congress and things like that, the Presidential papers before they go to the Presidential libraries and all that. It's a branch of the National Archives.

So, I had to go to Suitland, where there were several thousand boxes there. There was no way to describe it all. All I could do was just prep it, put it all together. We got three flatbed trucks, I remember, to move this stuff up. There was no place at Rutgers in the Library. So, I had to take it up to the Dana Library in Newark, and then, go up to Newark several times a week to work on it with an assistant--but just getting to know them and being under that kind of pressure.

Then, one of the things I remember so well--after a couple days of not taking a shower and wearing the same clothes and all that, I said, "I'm going home to get stuff and I'll come back the next day." So, I take the train and I arrive at the Metropark Station, which was the Harrison A. Williams Metropark Station, mostly because of the omnibus transportation act that he had [sponsored].

So much money came to New Jersey for public transportation--remember, like all that, there was no Amtrak, there was no nothing, until Williams, until his committee and the legislation. While I was there, the painters were there painting his name out, as my train arrived. So, that was something that was [poignant], I mean, to see somebody fall from grace so quickly like that.

We stayed up with him. I'm still in touch with his widow. She's still living, Jeanette Williams, a really, really remarkable person in her own right. He came [to Rutgers] several times. He was disbarred, among other things. After his release, he would come to look at his papers and parts of it--well, not his papers, but, in our government documents, we had the transcripts of the Abscam hearings in Congress, then, of course, the impeachment trial and all that. He was going over it. He never was able to get to practice law again.

Again, he came in just as a regular patron. Every day, he'd come in and use the collection, sitting in the New Jersey Room. I tried to keep people out, because whenever we had celebrities coming, people wanted to come and gawk. I remember, we really just didn't want to get that kind of a reputation.

[TV chef and author] Julia Child came in to use our collection one day. She was given an honorary degree at Rutgers. We got a call from the President's Office, "Do you have any old cookbooks?" We have a large rare book collection--I haven't even gotten into that at all. The rare book collection goes all the way back to the fifteenth century, as most older universities would have collections like that. We did dig up quite a number of cookbooks.

She spent the entire day with us. She was supposed to go to see lots of other things at the University; she canceled all those other meetings. She was so infatuated with the cookbooks and we were infatuated with meeting her. I asked her, "Is it okay if some of our colleagues come and meet you?" and that kind of thing. She was really delightful.

She was nothing like her persona, because I only knew her through the television, through her cooking shows. Of course, you think she's tipsy and all of that--that's all an act. She's pretending. She does not drink on television or anything like that. It's all fake. I just was impressed at how tall she was. She's like my height, just a really imposing figure--but, anyway, getting to meet a lot of people like that. I probably got off topic there.

SI: No, that's good. Did the fact that Senator Williams was associated with Abscam have any effect on getting money to process the papers?

RB: Oh, it really did. Getting the money was [tough]. We finally did get it. What we ended up doing, years later--it took many years later--we were able to work [on a fundraiser]. The Teamsters let us use their place. The international headquarters of the Teamsters is right next to the Capitol Building. We did a fundraiser there.

At first, actually, we went to the various labor unions to try to collect money. People were just so hesitant to give, "It's going to make it look like we condoned what he did." It was like, "Shame on you, after all he did for you, for the labor movement." [laughter] OSHA [Occupational Safety and Health Administration] existed because of the work that he did, so much legislation throughout the Great Society.

What we did was, we had a fundraiser and we had a number of prominent people that were involved that gave money, and from both sides of the aisle. I believe that [former First Lady] Barbara Bush gave a pretty substantial contribution. We had a fundraising event and a number of really interesting luminaries showed, several Senators showed up.

Dick McCormick was President by then, "Richard, Jr." He gave a speech, I gave a little speech, and there were a number of others. We raised enough money, several hundred thousand dollars, that we were able to at least get started. Then, we had other contributions come in later on. That was the biggest sort of private fundraising thing that I had done.

[Editor's Note: Dr. Richard L. McCormick served as Rutgers University President from 2002 to 2012.]

Before that, we did some also with Governor Byrne, [Brendan Byrne](#). We got his personal papers. As it turned out, some of the personal papers--this again is very relevant today--some of the personal papers were not so personal. There was definitely stuff from his [administration]. We had to give that material to the State Archives.

So, we actually did a deal with them. We gave them the papers, the papers that accidentally ended up in our collection. Then, they in turn gave us the papers of a New Jersey Congressman that they had. It was [Governor Cahill](#), but Governor Cahill was a Congressman before he was the Governor.

It turned out his Congressional papers, he took them to Trenton with him when he became Governor. We ended up getting those papers, the Congressional papers that came along with the Gubernatorial papers. So, we made a little swap there.

We did the same thing with Florio--when we got Florio's Congressional papers, some of the Governor's stuff was mixed in, later on. So, we were able to adjust that. The Williams [Collection], that was the toughest of the fundraising efforts that we did.

[Editor's Note: William T. Cahill served as Governor of New Jersey from 1970 to 1974. He also represented New Jersey in the US House of Representatives from 1959 to 1970. Governor Brendan T. Byrne served as Governor of New Jersey from 1974 to 1982. James J. Florio served as Governor of New Jersey from 1990 to 1994. He represented New Jersey in the US House of Representatives from 1975 to 1990.]

We did have some crises with some of the other collections, too. With the International Union of Electrical Workers, that was a federal grant, but it was an ongoing union. So, we were told, after the third year of the grant, "We've given you guys more than half a million dollars. It's time for you to raise your own money," because it's an ongoing concern.

So, we lobbied the union. We were able to get funding for a full-time person, who's now the Head of Special Collections at Penn State. I mean, so, he did very well. He did a wonderful job with those papers, pretty much right up until the time when the CWA took them over. So, that closed the collection. We didn't need an ongoing archivist at the time, because he did records management for them while being paid by Rutgers through money that they donated to us.

That was a very substantial move. I was amazed at, with all the bureaucracy that had set in at Rutgers, how little bureaucracy there was at the IUE. I was told I had to give a presentation, that we worked with one of their officers who worked in the President's office. He said, "Well, you're going to have plea to the President," and William Bywater was the President at that time. We ended up honoring him at Rutgers.

[Editor's Note: William H. Bywater (1920-2018) served as President of the IUE from 1978 to 1996.]

So, he ushers me into his office. Bywater doesn't even look at me. He's looking outside the window. He had a big picture window in this magnificent office in Washington. He was looking at the--it was the Soviet Embassy at the time--across the street, because there was a big demonstration there, as there was almost every day.

So, he's like looking at that and Walter tells me, "Okay, make your pitch." I tell him all about it. He sort of semi turns around--he never looks me in the eyes--he says, "I've got to pay off this guy. I've got to send money here. I've got to do this. We've got to pay off that Congressman to get this bill passed. We've got to do this, we've got to do that."

Finally, he says, "Walter," to the fellow that I worked with, "give him the money." [laughter] At first, I thought for sure, "I just want to get out of here. This guy..." So, that's how we got the money, and it kept coming every year until they were dissolved. So, we were able to completely process that collection, right up until their closing day.

So, as you could see, a lot of my time was just doing development and just scaring up enough money to keep the place going. I had to take my pleasure, my professional pleasure, out of seeing other people doing the work that I had always done, [laughter] kind of wanted to get back into doing. I wasn't able to do very much of it.

What I did do, though, was, I was one of the few people in my field that actually did scheduled reference work. I just wanted to stay close to our patrons. So, I made sure that I was assigned time at the reference desk. I think I did four hours a week and several Saturdays each semester, so [that] I could keep up with what people were using and be part of the gang. That was frowned upon, "What are you doing that for? You're supposed to sit in your office pontificating."

SI: By the larger field?

RB: Not by my colleagues, but by those outside Rutgers, "You're making it bad for the rest of us." So, that was very satisfying, because, I was starting to tell my colleagues, "I'm losing track," I mean, especially with this technological revolution.

I had no idea how to do any of that stuff. I was raising money for other people to do it, but, at first, I didn't know what all this metadata creation was and all that stuff. I was told it was important, "And you'd better fund it," but it was a great career.

I mean, I really [enjoyed it], all in all. There were obviously trials and tribulations and all that, many, many, many deans, many University Librarians served there. Of course, you have to kind of readjust every time, but I wouldn't trade it really for anything. It was really a great experience. I would certainly do it all over.

There was one time that I kind of started looking away--not that I was frustrated or anything, but it's like, "God, I've been here twenty years. If I stay any longer," I thought, "this is going to be a life sentence." I looked around and nothing even became close to the satisfaction I was getting here, I could tell.

I applied for the state archivist's position in Delaware. There was an archivist position at Yeshiva University, where they had no collections at all and I would be starting it from scratch. It just didn't make sense for me to leave.

Every day's different anyway. You never know what you're going to encounter when you come in, what collections you're going to hear about, where you'll be going, who you're going to meet. So, it kept me spry and active, still am to this day. Still, we're very much involved with things.

SI: You mentioned the rare book collection before. Do you want to say a little bit about that?

RB: So, Rutgers, of course, was founded in 1766 and they did have books and libraries. They weren't focused in the way they collected rare books. So, I tried to sharpen that focus--of course, early New Jersey, early printing in New Jersey, all the early New Jersey printed laws and acts of the Legislature and all of that.

The proprietors' tracks, those were particularly important. We had a number of them in the collection already. I was able to purchase a few more. Again, we had to raise money. Richard P. McCormick, the older McCormick, helped us raise some money from the proprietors and all of that to purchase those.

The proprietors' tracks were the first descriptions of the Colony of New Jersey that were printed in England and in Holland to get people to come to the Colony. It's pretty hard to convince somebody to have a perilous ocean journey to go to this unknown place that was pretty much unsettled. They were basically lies.

They were basically, "There's this incredible area. This is what we call New Jersey, East Jersey and West Jersey." These proprietors were trying to get people to buy land, to go there. Oh, the way they described it, I remember this one that had a picture of a tree that was like with fruit, just like there was so much fruit on it, it was on the ground, "The trees are bursting with fruit. It's going to be a Garden of Eden."

Then, just these racist epithets, "And there's a native population that's there to serve you. They don't know you're coming yet, but they're going to [serve you]." There's a picture of a boat coming in, like landing on the New Jersey Shore, a hand drawing. There are these people in full headdress, these Native Americans, that are waving to the ship, "Come on in." [laughter]

Anyway, those are really important. I mean, they're the first real description of New Jersey. Even though it wasn't a hundred percent accurate, some of it was accurate, and some of the really early maps also that were in those. So, we collected most of those and, again, concentrated heavily in New Jersey.

However, over the years, especially in the nineteenth century, the Library collected, they were very interested in the English (age of descent?), and so, [William] Cobbett and [Daniel] Defoe and writers like that. Since we had such great collections of those--I mean, really, probably among the best in the country--so, we would concentrate our buying in that area as well. Then,

because we had the Griffis Collection, we looked for things, descriptions of America--the Griffis Collection, basically what we call it is, "Westerners in Japan." So, anything that documented that, that we could afford, we'd put in there.

In addition to the fundraising for collections, I also did a tremendous amount (I concentrated very heavily on) getting endowments and building up the endowments that we already had to purchase things, to the point where we had no state money now to buy anything for Special Collections. It's all private endowments.

When I came, we had a state budget, I think of about thirty or forty thousand dollars, and some endowments. By the time I left, we had no state money--that was my punishment for, I guess, raising money on the side--and endowments that were certainly in the seven figures. It earned interest of over a hundred thousand a year, so, it had to be well over a million dollars.

Sometimes, they were bequests that we turned into endowments. There were just various ways that we would get them. The most recent was actually a colleague, someone who was active in the Midwest, but went to school at Rutgers. I knew him through archival associations and the like. I guess he had amassed a really nice library, but also a small fortune.

I think he was single and just didn't really have a lot to spend his money on. He was a hard worker who spent all his time working, probably didn't take many big vacations or anything. So, we got an endowment out of that.

A number of others--the best story I have is the Frank Potter endowment. Frank Potter, I think he might've been an insurance agent or something like that. We thought he was a derelict. In his old age, he would come and do--he was also a professional genealogist. In other words, he would look up people's family history for them.

We had a very big genealogy collection at Rutgers. We had church records and cemetery records, Bible records, I mean, all sorts, census records, manuscript and printed. So, many genealogists used our collections over the years. So, Frank Potter was one of them.

As he got older and older, he would come in all day and he was starting to lose it a little bit. He looked a little disheveled. His briefcase was basically the boxes that reams of paper come in, like the five hundred sheets of paper. When they would wear out, he would ask us if we could give him another one. He would tie that with string, that type of thing.

After a while, he really stopped doing research and just spent the whole day just sitting there, basically, like looking at books and talking to us. He'd come in, say, "Got something good for me to read? You have something new today?" Normally, it was going to be for research only. We really shouldn't allow someone like that even in if he's not really using the material for research, but we did.

Then, he disappeared. We just assumed that he probably had died or gone into a nursing home or something. We didn't hear anything until I got a call from a lawyer saying, "Do you

remember a Frank Potter?" I said, "Yes. It was a person that used to come in, if it's the same one I'm thinking of." I didn't think of him as being especially important.

"Well, he passed away a while back and you were named in his will," and that is our biggest endowment. This guy, you'd never know. I mean, we thought that he was like homeless. He kind of presented that way at the end of his life. So, like I say, we got money through all sorts of different types of venues. That was one of them.

We did build up the endowments, that took the pressure off needing university funds. I mean, if something huge comes up, we would still have to fundraise for it, but the normal stuff, including things that could cost up to ten or twenty thousand dollars, we had the funds for it in the endowments.

I was given a lot of leeway. When I first came to Rutgers, there was a university bibliographer that insisted on overseeing what we were buying, especially if it was over a certain amount of money. That all went away. I had a lot of leeway. I don't know if my successor does or not.

SI: This issue of shrinking state funds, is that one you see among your colleagues in other states or is it more unique to New Jersey?

RB: Yes. The specific way it happened with us is that, yes, there's less and less money--that's fewer and fewer dollars that go towards the purchase of materials. We had our university bibliographer, who by then was called, I think, the Associate University Librarian for Collection Development. We got along very, very well with him. He's still a very good friend, who's retired and lives in New York now. I'm still in touch with him.

He was in a real bind, where his budget was cut more. He was in charge of all the purchasing--except for Special Collections, we had our own endowments--but he was in charge of doling out the money. He was really desperate for money. So, he basically asked me for a favor, "Can I cut you ten thousand dollars this year? I see your endowments are growing and growing, because we're just desperate. We can't buy the most basic books."

That went on and on--finally, I said, "Just take it all." That way, we're not bound by [it]. We don't have to beg the University for money, at least for materials--for staff, yes, for general operating support, yes, but not for materials, not for books and manuscripts and the like. We became more autonomous that way.

The budget goes up and down depending on how much we can add to the endowments, what the interest rate is, the return the University's getting, but, in my latter years, it was certainly at least five percent. The University, the Foundation, takes a cut and all that, but we did very well in that area. That was not something that we had to worry about, thank goodness, because we had to worry about lots of other things, like running the place and, of course, processing all of that.

SI: We have been mostly talking about your career. Do you want to say anything about your life outside of Rutgers?



RB: Yes, yes. Well, this is related to Rutgers. Of course, I was interested in libraries and all that, so, got put on lots of commissions and what-have-you. I was on our local Metuchen Library Board of Trustees and that type of thing.

They tried to get me involved in local politics. I'll never forget that. The [Mayor] was my next-door neighbor. I was serving on the Library Board. He comes and he says, "Well, I'd like you to become a Democratic committeeman." I said, "No, no, I don't want to get into the political sphere. I'm really happy serving the way I serve."

The reason I was on the Library Board was that Don Wernick was the Mayor of the town. He also taught at Rutgers. He was a pharmacy professor. He owned the local drugstore downtown. We were friends and he was a member of my congregation at the synagogue in town. That's how I got it, and I enjoyed helping out. We had real great luminaries on the board. We had some interesting authors and we had professors, what-have-you. I really enjoyed that.

But later, a new mayor said, "Well, why would you be on that board? If you become a committeeman..." he thought I was playing hardball with him, that I was playing hard to get and I was asking for something like in return for being a committeeman. He's talking about, "Oh, you get to go to the national convention, and you get to do this and that." "That's not what I'm about."

So, finally, he says, "Okay, I'll tell you what--if you'll become a committeeman, if you'll take this on, you just choose--what do you want?" He says like, "What board do you want to be on? I can put you on the Planning Board--nothing will be built in this town without your permission," as if, like, I wanted that kind of power, as if I was like trying to grab power. [laughter] So, as it turned out, I stayed on the Library Board. In fact, I only served that one term. The next mayor replaced me with somebody else.

So, now, ironically, I'm the Chair of the Library Board here in New Port Richey, Florida, and, also, on the county library board. I've really gotten involved more in the community since I retired even.

Now, the congregation I belong to here, Jewish Community Center of West Pasco, Florida, does not have a rabbi. It's an older congregation and they don't have the resources to hire somebody. Because I was doing a lot, they could see that I was fairly learned, that I was very active in our synagogue there and had done a lot of studying of Judaica, so, they made me their (unpaid) spiritual leader. [laughter]

So, now, I'm getting ready for the High Holidays. That's why we rushed this interview, to do this today, because I'm going to be spending the rest of the week working on that--so, very involved with the congregation and all that entails, what-have-you. I do funerals and weddings and baby-namings, what-have-you--unfortunately, more funerals than weddings.

One of the things that I really enjoy doing here is, I got put on the Food Policy Council for the county here. We study and regulate the distribution of food and the distribution, of course, of free food and the like, the various food banks and, also, working with growers and trying to

make things healthy. For instance, we have a local fresh fruit market. Almost every town in Florida has one, the farmer's market day. Ours is Tuesday, and the library actually runs it. It's in the courtyard of the library.

So, we were able to get a mandate that the people who sell the organic food there, which is normally priced higher than people who can't afford it can pay, that they're taking SNAP money now. They're required to, and I think they're reimbursed for doing it. It's what used to be called food stamps--so, things like that, working environmental concerns and things like that.

So, it gets me very close to politics. Once again, I'm refusing to get any more involved than I am. They're starting a historical commission in our county and they want me to organize that. Well, like, I haven't said yes, yet, because I'm starting to get so overcommitted. It's starting to remind of the old life, but it's a lot easier to do when you're retired, because you get to make your own schedule. You get to pick and choose what you want to do and how to spend your time.

So, even though I'm spending most of it doing things--I'm involved still with National History Day. Now, I'm judging down here, as well as in New Jersey, because we're doing it on Zoom. So, I got to work with the high school students here, things like that.

We still have one grandchild living with us, so, we're being parents again. He's fifteen years old and in high school. His younger brother was with us and, now, he's with the other grandparents in South Carolina. So, it's kind of starting over again, in that respect. So, we figure it's either going to keep us young or kill us. It is amazing when you go to the parent-student meetings and the like and the parents are young enough to be our grandchildren practically. [laughter]

It's been rewarding in its own way. The only problem is, we can't be like "good grandma" and "good grandpa" anymore. Now, we have to be "strict grandma and grandpa." We have to have rules and things like that, whereas, before, all we had to do was spoil them.

It's been rewarding, but the synagogue takes a lot of my time. Like, yesterday, in preparation for the High Holidays, we visit all the cemeteries in the area where people (congregants' families) are buried and friends and say memorial prayers as part of getting ready for the High Holidays. There's just many, many activities that I have to be involved in.

SI: I am curious, being involved in the library world there, where you're kind of on the front lines of this whole culture war, of books being banned, has that affected your work?

[Editor's Note: The interviewer is referring to book censorship policies pushed by Florida Governor Ron DeSantis.]

RB: It had, yes, especially here in Florida. I'm sure you've been reading what's going on here, and we've been fairly lucky. We've had people come and complain, but what we did was, we set up a formal way of doing it, where they have to put their name to it. They have to fill out a form.

We word it in such a way, "Which books would you like us to remove?" and then, how did we write it? We wrote it in a way that makes it very difficult for them to proceed. In other words,

"We understand a parent's right to restrict what their children read and we support that. As the parent, you have control of what *your* child does (we emphasize "your"). Why do you want us to remove this, so that other people don't have the opportunity to read it whose parents want them to read that?"

So, so far, nobody's filed a formal complaint in our city or in our county. Now, they go to County Commission meetings and they go to our City [Council meetings]. I go to most of the City Council meetings; like, we have a meeting tomorrow night.

So, there's a session, when the City Council meets, people can come and complain about things at first. You have the session where the public can--I shouldn't say complain--have the floor. They can mention any issue they want. So, people will *kvetch* about stuff like that at the County Commission meetings.

County government in Florida is much, much stronger than in New Jersey. It's a whole other world here politically. People who complain there, I mean, it's pretty strong stuff when they come in and [say], "You're teaching my kid how to be a homosexual," that kind of stuff, "by putting these books in the [library]," that kind of stuff, "You're grooming our kids."

The Governor's taken advantage of this. I mean, certainly, it's that whole [tactic], taking advantage of that, that group of people, and really riling them up. We haven't had any really [bad situations]--other counties have had a lot more trouble than we have.

In fact, *The New York Times* was banned in one county. At first, it was [that] there was the demand because it was so expensive. Then, when somebody offered to pay for it, a county resident, still, then, it was, "No, because we can't have fake news in our collection, in our libraries." So, we are fighting a big battle. This is Banned Books Week now. So, it's a lot closer to home than it used to be.

So, a little bit about county government, though--I wasn't used to this, because New Jersey, every square inch of New Jersey is incorporated and city government's very important. I forget how many cities there are, but it's in the, what, five hundreds?

SI: Yes, it's like 540 or something [564].

RB: It's a lot of municipalities. In fact, we used to complain in Metuchen, because Metuchen is in the center of a doughnut and we're surrounded by Edison Township. So, when it snows, the plow plows in Edison Township, comes into Metuchen, lifts the plow, because you've got to drive through there, and then, drops it again. Students who get bused [go] right past Metuchen High School to go to J. P. Stevens, miles down the road.

So, there's advantages and disadvantages to each, but, here in Florida, it is literally the opposite. There are very few incorporated places. I live in one of the very few places that are incorporated. New Port Richey's very much like Metuchen, a small borough with a main street and all that. It's kind of the center for the [county], but most of it is unincorporated.

So, the county runs almost everything. In New Port Richey, everything is local except for the schools. The schools are completely run by the county. So, county government takes on a much bigger role than it does in New Jersey. I mean, I know the freeholders have some roles, but nothing close to the way [they do in Florida], and almost all your property tax goes to the county, much of it does. So, you're really relying on the county.

We're one of the few exceptions. So, Pasco County, where I live, is huge in area, covers a big, big area, but there are only, I believe, five or six municipalities. There's New Port Richey, Port Richey, Zephyrhills, Dade City is the county seat, which is like forty miles away. So, there are now government centers in New Port Richey and Land O' Lakes, which is not even incorporated, but it's in the center of the county.

Then, Dade City, the county seat, is in the eastern part of the county. When you're on jury duty, you used to have to go to Dade City, which is quite a hike. Now, we have our local government centers. So, that took a while to get used to, knowing that you really have to do things through the county.

Yes, the book bannings and telling teachers how to teach and the whole idea of making sure that kids are not ashamed to be Americans, that kind of thing, it's big news here. We're holding up pretty well here. I mean, many of the teachers that we know are just saying they're just ignoring it. "We've got a big teacher shortage--they're not going to fire me."

In the library, we're holding our own, up until now, but you don't know about the future. We don't know who's going to show up and cause any trouble, but I think, in many ways, it's bringing these issues to the attention of people that never even thought about it before. In some ways, that's a good thing. It's definitely getting people to become active in these issues that never were before, who always just took it for granted that material would be available in the library.

It's been a pretty good retirement. It's been six years already. Yes, time goes very fast, that's for sure. My father always had the saying--he would say over and over, especially as he got older, couldn't believe that he was an old man--he said, "Boy, the days go so slow, but the years go so fast." Now, I disagree with him--I think the days go pretty quickly, too.

SI: Is there anything else you'd like to add or anything that we didn't get into that we should?

RB: No, I think we've covered a lot of it. We've gone through an interesting, different childhood right through, we went through professional life and all that, and even into retirement. So, I'm sure I will think of things, especially when I read the transcript. Yes, if you don't mind, I'll put things in writing or we can have another session.

SI: Yes, you can do it either way. You can add details or, if there's enough, we can do another brief interview. I might see stuff that I want to follow up on as I'm going through the transcript, too.

RB: So, I'm certainly open to that. That would great. Again, remembering my good friend and colleague, [Professor of History Rudy Bell], who encouraged us to do this, after you gave your presentation to the *emeriti*, in his way, he encouraged us to do this. I certainly wasn't planning on doing it right away and that really did it. When Rudy passed away, it was like, "Boy, I really have to do this," because you don't know how much time you have on this Earth.

It's really important to do this. I always tried to encourage Don Sinclair to be interviewed. I couldn't believe that he refused to do it.

SI: Yes.

RB: Back when you guys were doing the World War II veterans, he had an incredibly interesting World War II experience. We kept saying, whenever I and Kurt [Piehler saw him], "Come on, you've got to be interviewed." He would say, "No, I never did anything," but what he "never did" was, he was drafted, of course.

He was sent to Cornell University because he was very adept at languages, to learn more German language study, and then, was shipped off to, basically, right behind the front. He would interrogate people. He would interrogate prisoners of war. To me, that's a pretty important thing, but...

SI: Yes, I know Sandra [Holyoak] and I asked him as well. He is one of those folks I wish we had interviewed.

RB: And you would think somebody who was so interested in history, from such an early age on--he was a man before his time when it came to that (or behind his time, I don't know exactly how to put it).

We have a picture, the best picture I had with him, is when he's a teenager. The Genealogical Society of New Jersey is doing one of their [events]. They copied almost all the cemeteries (and we have those records Rutgers), copied whatever's on the tombstones. It looked like the average age of the person out there was probably seventy years old. It's in the middle of the summer and they're wearing suits, of course, and the (top hat?). It's probably in maybe the early to mid '30s or early '30s, yes, right around 1930.

They're out there and there's this one kid who's standing right there in the middle of them, right--that's him. To see he was that interested in preserving history at that age was really something. I wish you would've had a chance to interview him.

He was a child prodigy, a pianist. Actually, he had his own radio show in New York City, where he, like, as a young kid, had mastered all these piano things. At some point, I don't know what caused him to give it up. He had a grand piano in his house.

If there was a piano--we'd go someplace and there'd be a meeting--if there's a piano there, he would just go there and start playing, mostly made up, sort of like ragtime/jazz type stuff, but he

was an incredibly talented person with just an incredible personality. I'm sorry, that's another reason, I don't even come close to coming up to his level, but I figured that's an inspiration.

SI: Yours is fascinating as well. I will conclude now, thank you.

-----END OF INTERVIEW-----

Reviewed by Shaun Illingworth 10/1/2024

Reviewed by Ronald Becker 11/2024