The History Professional  An Interview with Robert Ellis

Robert (Bob) Ellis retired in April 2018 after 31 years of service at the National Archives and Records Administration (NARA). Bob was a reference archivist, responsible for Federal and DC court records housed in NARA’s downtown building on Pennsylvania Avenue. Bob graduated from Trident Technical College with an Associate Degree in Commercial Graphics and the University College at the University of Maryland with a B.A. in history.

Interview by Thomas Faith

Why did you decide to become the archivist for Federal judicial records at the National Archives and Records Administration?

I started my archival profession late in life. I was a graphics artist for many years, but I always was interested in history, so I went to school at night to get a B.A. in American history. I got my degree at age 40. Then I saw a job for an intermittent in the still-pictures branch at NARA and, because of my commercial artist, photography and print making background, they put me in charge of the poster collection.

Later I applied for the CIDS program, NARA’s archivist training program, which has now been discontinued. This was a wonderful program; they sent you to many of the different departments in the National Archives to get an understanding of the different collections and they taught you archival skills. Now the agency wants people with an archival/library science degree.

After this three-year training, I was assigned as an archivist in the Civil Reference Branch, and for two or three years I worked with maritime records. The reason I became a specialist in the federal court records is that my supervisor walked up to me and said: “Bob, you’re the expert in federal court records.” It was probably the case of someone leaving and my being in the right place at the right time.

In about three months, one of my supervisors said: “God, you’re good at this.” That was so gratifying to hear because by then I had already begun to love these records and the history of the courts, particularly the records of the United States District Court of the District of Columbia. Since DC is a federal enclave, the federal courts serve as a local court. You have insanity cases, divorce cases, lawsuits, and other records about the citizens of the Washington, DC, area. I was always fascinated by what you might call “the common people” of Washington, DC, and the lives they lead.

But I love all of NARA’s judicial records and it’s hard to say why I do. After all this time they’re like friends and it was really hard, when I retired, to leave not only my colleagues but my record-friends.

What do you remember your first year being like?

The first year was sheer terror because every question was totally new. I did not have the background on the history of the courts or the record keeping systems, so it would take me four or five times longer to answer a reference question. Not only did I have to deal with the details of the Supreme Court records and the federal court records, I had to learn something about the other records in my branch in case somebody asked a question. And sometimes someone would come in and say: “I saw this record at the National Archives.” I would take them at their word and look and look. It wasn’t until much later in my career that I could confidently say, for example: “No, you saw that at the Library of Congress.”

I learned by researchers coming in and answering their reference questions and so each reference request, each letter, was like a teaching tool and I would learn little things about the records. I think it really does take five years for an archivist to really know the records in his or her custody; how those records intersect and connect. Happily, a decade in I could answer many questions off the top of my head.

What are the main challenges of working with judicial records at the National Archives?

It’s fairly easy to use the records of the 19th and part of the 20th Centuries. The docket books have a name index in front of each volume. So, if you can get within a certain time frame, you can find what you’re looking for: the name and the case file number, and then go to the records. You need to know a time frame in order to look for the case file number because there’s not an index to the U.S. Court of Claims until about 1960. And certain Supreme Court files also don’t have a name index in the front. So sometimes, finding a case file number can be very difficult. The best way to do this is to Google the name of the case file to get the case file number or a researcher can come in and look through the docket books to find it.

Another issue is that not all case file numbers are in the same format. From 1792 to 1933, the Supreme Court used a straight numbering system. In those the docket books the real case file number is on the right. After 1933, the case file number changed to, for example, 5-28 October term 1962. Then around 1970, that numbering system changed again; they used something like 75-384. But in that transition period both the old system and the new system are used at the same time. So that can be kind of tricky. All courts starting changing their case file numbers sometime in the 1970’s. So often using Google to find a case file number can make
things easier. Google the case file title and the case file number will sometimes also pop up.

Finally, a lot of legal records people assume can be found in the Supreme Court’s files actually are not where the researcher assumes they are. If a case only got as far as the US Court of Appeals that case is housed in a regional archive. So, for example, a case heard in an appellate court in Pennsylvania would be found at the National Archives in Philadelphia. There are also thousands of informal populous cases not heard by the high court that were docked but not heard by the court.

Finding something can get complicated. Here’s another example: when the suffragettes marched and were arrested for protesting in front of the White House, many people, including myself, assumed the file was in the criminal court of the District of Columbia. I couldn’t find it. But eventually I looked at the docket books and there I found some of the names of the people who were arrested who were appealing their cases. That information eventually led me to the police court for the District of Columbia and the National Archives does not have those records which cleared up why the case couldn’t be found in the criminal court of the District of Columbia.

What are the biggest lessons you learned in providing useful assistance to Researchers?

I help people. And they thank me. They write and say “Oh thank you so much. Thank you.” And I just blew it off. I thought … oh that’s my job; I can go up to the stacks, get records, and fax them to you. I didn’t really understand what locating some documents for some researcher meant to them until my mother got sick and we had to get her into an assisted living home. We needed documents from the Kershaw County South Carolina clerk’s office in order finish filling out the forms. After speaking to someone in the office, she faxed me the documents within two hours. And then it dawned on me: because I was so emotional – this lady did this for me. I didn’t have to drive 500 miles. Instead of the intellectual aspect of locating the document, I felt the gratefulness of the researcher.

Are there different considerations you make when assisting lawyers with records, as opposed to those engaged in other research?

I never had different considerations for assisting lawyers than I did for other researchers. However, if lawyers or researchers wanted documents from a large file, they would have to hire a professional researcher or visit the National Archives.

However, I did have a soft spot for researchers doing historical research, local District of Columbia history, and people looking for something relating to their lives, such as seeking the name of a parent or sibling, and adoption records.

How, in your experience, did members of the public become aware of the judicial records/resources at NARA?

Researchers learn about Judicial records by going to the National Archives website, googling, referrals from the Courts, from other researchers or just by accident. And over the years researchers who met me at conferences, people I had helped before, and people who had my contact information would contact me directly via email.

What do you think about current trends toward digitization and how they are applicable to Federal Judicial Records?

Digitization promotes online access to Government information by the public. It also not only connects the many libraries that provide information on court systems, it gives researchers, judicial historians, and legal professionals easy access to find what they need in an efficient, economical manner. By connecting these dots more efficiently, all of us can gain a broader perspective of not only our legal system, but many other legal systems as well.

The ramifications of judicial rulings, such as Brown vs Board of Education, become more poignant when – with the click of a mouse – one can see the image of a brave African-American little girl attending a newly desegregated school for the first time, when we can read the details of a high court ruling almost immediately in the privacy of our homes, or when we want to read for ourselves the founding tenants of our Democratic process.

That thrill of holding an original document, of seeing an old faded signature is disappearing. But with the digitization of that torn and fading paper, we make it possible for those who follow us to connect to the past long after that original document crumbles to dust.

What do you believe you will miss most about your job now that you are retired?

My brain lights up when I am on the hunt for archival records and trying to piece together the many clues found in a paper trail. I love learning something new. I am also a people person and working in NARA’s reference room several hours a day, I loved the detailed conversations I had with researchers who, like me, love history and piecing together the information they so wanted to find. From finding out why someone thought there might be a ghost in a house where they once worked, to finding Lincoln’s first paycheck (which was never cashed), to rushing a death penalty file to the Supreme Court, to locating someone’s long lost sister… that connection between a person and information that could change a life or shed light on the past invigorated me endlessly.

What are your plans for the future?

Since leaving NARA in April 2018, I have taken up hobbies I have always wanted to try: honing my skills with a bow and arrows at a local archery club, exploring my love of photography through a local camera club and auditing college classes in painting and digital photography at a local university. I’ve expanded my interest in bird watching, seen my granddaughter more, and my wife and I are planning a trip to Lincoln country in Illinois. I’m also researching an idea for a book on local DC history; whether it will be self-published or will have a publisher – the future will tell.

As I cast a wide net, I look forward to new explorations and suggestions.