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John Webb interview, Former University Archivist, University Libraries, Wright State University

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WRIGHT STATE UNIVERSITY
Retiree Association Oral History Project

Interview date: October 12, 2007

Interviewer: Chris Wydman
 Archivist, Special Collections and Archives Department

Interviewee: John Webb, Former University Archivist, University Libraries

CW: This is Chris Wydman, archivist in the Special Collections and Archives Department at Wright State University Libraries. Today is October 12, 2007, and today I am interviewing John Webb, who was the first archivist here at Wright State in the libraries, and we are doing this as part of the Wright State University Retiree Association's oral history project. So without further ado, John, welcome back.

JW: Thank you.

CW: We are very happy you could come in today to share some of your Wright State memories with us. Let us begin, if you could please just tell us a little bit about yourself and your background before you came here to Wright State.

JW: Well, actually I worked for the University of Dayton Research Institute on Wright-Patterson Air Force Base, designing and operating what were called documentation systems. They were automated information retrieval systems of technical reports, and we worked on contracts. Then I worked for a year down on campus at UD, and I was working on a master's degree in history, and one day an advertisement came across my desktop for a one year program in archival librarianship at the University of Oregon, federally funded. So, I thought, I love the information work but I also, as I said, was working on a master's degree in history, and I thought, "Well, gee, this sounds like a good fit", and I applied and was accepted. So, it was in the library school- the University of Oregon had a library school; now it's one of the many that's closed- so I got a degree from there and actually had no intention to come back this way. I was born in Springfield, but really had no intention to come back, but the world was different then and I was actually recruited to come here because the director, who was the first director of libraries here, Jim Dodson, I had worked with his wife at the University of Dayton. This was at the beginning of the founding of what was called the Ohio Network of American History Research Centers, and Jake Dorn and Carl Becker had worked to get Wright State named as the representative for this area, and the library had gone along with that. I don't know when I actually accepted the job; I didn't arrive until September, but I know by at least April I had already accepted the job. Not only was I recruited, but also it was a better salary than other people were getting, so quite to my surprise I ended up back in Dayton, and started here in September, sometime between the first and the tenth of September in 1970. The program, there was one room in Millett Hall, where the library

was in those days, and the room was much smaller than this area that we are sitting in, not including the stacks there [motioning toward the collection stacks area in 401 Dunbar]. There was one collection, the Cox papers, and there were some shelves on the wall that had some books, and the back-run of bound Playboys. [Laughs]

CW: Really.

JW: Yes. So, that's what was there when I started work.

CW: Okay, very good. So you were hired as an archivist right from the beginning.

JW: Right, yes, and actually my title was head of Archives and Special Collections. So it was, at that time even, University Archives and Special Collections, special collections was already defined to mean books and manuscripts. And because of the Ohio Network of American History Research Centers, it also included responsibility for working with local governments in the seventeen counties that were southwestern Ohio. Don't ask me to name the seventeen counties anymore; I used to be able to do it.

CW: And you said the Cox papers were already here?

JW: The Cox papers were already here. At the time I could have told you how they got here, but your own finding aid would tell you that.

CW: Alright, very good. Who was it that contacted you about coming to Wright State?

JW: I got a phone call one day from Jim Dodson who was director of the library. They called the library school for me with a message to call them back, and I called them back- in those days on a pay phone, reverse the charges- and he proceeded to describe this job to me, and I was somewhat pleasantly surprised, because if I had had to write a job description for the kind of job I might like right out of school, I couldn't have done a whole lot better job of writing it than what he described to me. The salary was also better than people were getting and I had met Jim because of working with his wife Ann, I'd met him once maybe. So, I had some other opportunities but this one was by far the best sounding and the best pay, so I accepted. As I said, it probably was April, there may be letters around somewhere and I probably in my files may have a letter that says here's the day I accepted it, but I know that it was sometime either early in the spring quarter or at least certainly it was before June, I know that.

CW: And at that time were there many jobs available in archives?

JW: Oh yeah. In 1970, universities were still growing like crazy. This place was, you know, but it had only been a university for a couple of years, but all places were growing. So, yes, if one didn't limit oneself geographically, there was not a problem getting a job anywhere because there were more openings really than there were people to fill them. That was true of people with library degrees, too. Things were just growing like crazy. So I had several opportunities, but this is the one that I took. And I didn't even look very hard, because he called me so early on. Many people hadn't even started looking for a job, and I already had one.

CW: When you first arrived, what were your early impressions of Wright State?

JW: Well, there were only four buildings, the original four: Millett, Oelman, Fawcett and whatever the other one is.

CW: Allyn.

JW: Allyn, right. So, it was small and it was not only largely a commuter school- which it was and probably still is- but the other thing at the time was that the number of part-time, evening students outnumbered the number of full-time students. So there were more part-time students than full-time students, and in fact there was this very odd period of time, sometime around 4:00 or 4:30, when there would be everybody leaving, and then there would be a whole new group coming in for night classes. That was one impression; a second impression was that, totally by accident, because of the tunnel system, Wright State had already begun to be very attractive to students with disabilities. At that early date, [it] already had an active program for higher education for students with disabilities, [and] already had a disability resource center, which eventually we worked within the library and helped to begin to do some things. And it was relatively small, the library was small. On the other hand, they hadn't started digging the holes yet, but there was no question that it was going to move; the plans were already there for the new library. And the faculty, the faculty was young. There were four colleges: business, liberal arts, engineering and science, and education. The school had been put together as a joint branch of Miami and Ohio State, and the College of Business and the College of Engineering and Science- or maybe it was science and engineering, I don't remember- was largely staffed by people that Ohio State had hired, and the College of Liberal Arts and [College of] Education was largely staffed by people that had been selected from Miami. So that is how they split the responsibilities, and there was a noticeable difference; you could tell that there was a big difference. The College of Business and the College of Science and Engineering- or science and engineering, whatever it was called- was a whole different kind of feeling than the College of Liberal Arts and the College of Education. Although in the history department, they were largely young faculty. Jake Dorn and Carl Becker, they came from the University of Oregon. Well, Jake had gotten his PhD, and Carl had gotten in the middle of inter-departmental politics in a department of history that was split terribly, and was unable to even get a committee together, so he had to basically almost start all over again. It was horrific, but he did it. So the history department and the political science department were largely, within the College of Liberal Arts, my feeling was that those departments were stronger than some of the other departments in the College of Liberal Arts. There was no question that if you took the colleges as wholes, as units, Ohio State had worked hard to get good people into their colleges and Miami hadn't worked quite as hard. Let's put it that way, and I'll stop there.

CW: Sure.

JW: But the librarian had been someone who had worked at Ohio State, and so Ohio State also was given responsibility for starting the library, and Jim had been a dynamic, young librarian at Ohio State and was sent here, and gladly came here. So those are my [impressions], I think I'm probably 75% right about what I just said. [Laughs]

CW: Okay [laughs]. So the library at the time was at Millett-

JW: Yes, it occupied the first floor and the ground floor.

CW: -and you had a small corner.

JW: On the first floor, back in the far corner of the building. No windows.

CW: Was it a separate room, or-

JW: Yes, it had a lock on the door, so, yes. They had to lock the Playboys up [laughs]

CW: Right. What were the libraries like then? Were there many staff?

JW: I've been trying to remember all of this. The organization was not a traditional organization. Later it changed into something a little more traditional. The media component was strong, and I was head of archives and special collections, but everyone in public services- well, it wasn't called public services, it was called information services or something like that- everyone did reference desk duty, including some of these media people that had never worked on a reference desk in their lives. At any rate, I worked 15 hours a week on the reference desk, which I loved, as I was one of the best reference librarians I have ever known, besides Mosley [laughs]. I worked evenings, weekends, whenever the shifts were. But the rest of the time I was working largely- well, I don't know if you're going to get into that. There were, oh gee, how many reference librarians were there? Well, if you counted the reference librarians, and then there were people in a classification called "administrative assistant" or something like that- these were people, because of Wright-Pat, these were people who were often the spouses of Air Force officers, (these were all women, by the way), or engineers, because in those days General Motors still had a big presence here. So they were largely the spouses of professional men, often engineers, and many of these people had master's degrees, so they did a good job at the reference desk, they did reference, too- so I don't know how many of us there were total. If I started thinking of last names I might be able to get it, but there were maybe six to eight reference librarians. But it was a growing staff, and the place needed to grow, because the university was growing. So we continued to grow most of the time I was here.

CW: And were they trained librarians?

JW: Oh yeah, the librarians all had library degrees, that was part of the requirement, and the ones that were classified staff, like I said, almost all of them had master's degrees in something or other. So it was a fairly highly educated [staff], and I think that some of the other librarians had other master's degrees. Most were relatively young. There was also a place where you could get media certification, so as part of the library there was also an instructional component, and that was somehow- and this you would have to check the records- I think the media people were in the information services department, but then there was this second, separate instruction department. And there were three assistant directors; there was the traditional technical services, and information services, which was a broad umbrella, and then the instruction unit had an assistant director and maybe one or two other full-time faculty and lots of adjunct faculty. I

taught, for instance, a number of courses. Graduate level courses for school librarians and people upgrading their certificates or working on master's degrees or whatever.

CW: Do you remember any of the people you worked with in the library in general? I'm not talking specifically about the archives, but some of the people who were around when you first started?

JW: I remember their names, sure. Do you want me to spout off names?

CW: Sure.

JW: I'm not very good at names, I warn you about that. All my life I've been terrible with names. There was a woman named Linda Krantz, Howard Jarrell, Margaret [Roach], Don Jacobson. Oh gee, and then among the classified staff, I'm trying to think who the names were. We grew so much and so fast during that period, there are names that I can remember that came in within a couple of years. Jim Dodson was the director. There were three assistant directors: Gladys Wessels was the instruction programs, [pause], John somebody, Ellison, was the information services, and Milton Wolf had just started as the technical services head, and then there was the head of acquisitions whose name was Bob. I can't think of his last name... Kowalski, Bob Kowalski, I think that was it. I forget who was in cataloging, I don't remember their names. As I said, we had two things: we had a lot of turnover fairly early on, for which there were some reasons, and then we were growing like crazy, too.

CW: In those early years, what kind of hours did the archives have? Were they limited hours? And were you the only one working?

JW: When I started as head of Archives and Special Collections, I was both head and foot; I was head and chief cook and bottle washer. The hours were pretty much "work-day" hours, but anyone could make an appointment and come in anytime. That rarely happened in the early days. There wasn't much to come look at.

CW: Right, there weren't many patrons at the beginning.

JW: Well, and not much to look at.

CW: Right.

JW: Except the Playboys.

CW: Sure.

JW: And in all the time in that little room back there- only once, I think there were three boys who came in and actually said up front that they wanted to look at the pictures- everybody always came in to read the articles.

CW: Right. With the Cox collection in there, did you spend any time with that collection?

JW: Yes. I hadn't been here too long before I convinced Jim, or John Ellison, to whom I reported directly, that I needed a student assistant. So, I hired Bob Smith, and he was an undergraduate at the time, and, you know, I do not remember; Bob would have a better idea of how we were working on that than I would, because I was spending an awful lot of time, [pause], The Ohio Network of American History Research Centers was growing like crazy. The staff at Ohio Historical Society at the time was young, dynamic, just go get 'em, and we used to meet at least once a quarter in various places, with people from all of the seven institutions plus Ohio Historical [Society]. So we were doing an awful lot of planning. When I arrived, there was a guide to archival manuscripts in Ohio that was published in about 1972 that actually Carl Becker and Jake Dorn had also done quite a bit of work, and I then went out and continued to get that, and I put the section together for southwestern Ohio. I was active making contacts with various officials, primarily county government officials, in all 17 counties and out visiting them. So, particularly over in Millett, there was nothing but that one room, so I spent an awful amount of time, you could say, building castles in the air. But knowing that we were going to be moving and knowing that things were going to change, I was making a lot of contacts and making a lot of preparations for how things would be, and given how things were going on then with the building of that network and so on, there was enough to keep me busy, I remember that. And it was fun; it was a lot of fun. Because that whole group was just dynamic and we'd get around a table about this size and arguments would break out and pounding the table, you know, there was a lot of energy. And then the Society of Ohio Archivists- does that still exist?

CW: Yes, it sure does.

JW: That was founded just about that time. I think I was vice-president or something like that.

CW: I think that was around '73 or so.

JW: No, it would have been earlier than that. And actually, in 1971 we met in the fall when the meeting was here at Wright State, and I organized and put together the program. So, as I said, given the limitations of Millett Hall, there wasn't much more that I could do, other than an awful lot of what today would be called networking. So I did a lot of networking, and didn't even know it. Had no clue that I was doing networking, but I did a lot of it.

CW: Did any other materials come in prior to the move, or were you pretty much in a holding pattern at that point?

JW: There were no other manuscript materials that came in that I can remember. You all must have records that would back that up. However, we were also trying to support the English department in several programs, and so I knew what areas there were people who might need some literature, and I spent a fair amount of time scanning antiquarian- whatever is was called, A.B. Bookman, Bookman's Weekly- and had several dealers looking for first editions for the works of a couple of authors- Edith Wharton and someone- so we bought some books, but the shelves, there wasn't much room. Because my desk was against one wall, and there was a file cabinet probably, and there must have been a side chair and I think there was a table in there. Bob may have a better memory and there may be a picture around, but if there was wall mounted

shelving I think it only covered two walls, and as I said, the room was much smaller than the space we are in right here.

CW: Let's move forward to when you did move over to the library here. Where were you first located in the new library?

JW: Alright, now we need to switch over to another former life, because there was a lot of churn in the library and without getting into a lot, let's just say that all three assistant directors were either fired or very much encouraged to leave, as was the director. We had this odd structure and there was this person whose title was head of information services or something like that, and since I came in here- I was right out of library school but I had a lot of experience; I had more experience than most of the people who worked here, quite frankly, even though I was only twenty-nine when I started here- and I became that, then they hired an associate director, and then Jim left to go to the University of Texas at Dallas. They did a national search, and the person who was associate director had been made acting director, and then from this national search- I remember this because I was on the search committee- we actually interviewed six candidates, but he was the one to be selected to be the new director, and then there was a whole level of the administration of the organization that was empty. So he set about recruiting and there was a national search, and I applied for a job as assistant director for public services, because we had reorganized. And much to my shock I was selected for it, so by the time we moved I already had become assistant director and was in the process [pause], I'd have to look at something to see if I had hired Pat Nolan as my replacement before we moved, or whether he started right after we moved. But I'm virtually certain that he didn't start work until after the move, and so when I took that position, by that time Bob had graduated and we had managed to make a full-time position for him, although I trust his memory more than I trust mine about all this. Because I think he went right from a student to a full-time position. I don't think there was a hiatus. With this new administration of a new director, and there was another assistant director hired and then another one hired, the building was already going up. It had been planned by others, and we know how it is all chopped up on the ends with these small rooms, it was just not functional like that. So I was very involved, as the assistant director of public services, in trying to figure out how in the heck this building was going to work as a library for the public, because it was not very traditionally shaped as a library, and then in addition had all these funny little rooms chopped off at the ends. But we recruited, we got Pat, Bob was there as a full-time person, and we moved into the building. But Pat, he must have started not long after we moved in, so my connection then to the program here was indirect in the sense that as assistant director of public services, they reported to me. There are many, many days in my career that I regretted ever leaving the archives. On the other hand, I suspect that my receiving that position was probably good overall, because it allowed me to be in a position where I could direct resources into the Archives and Special Collections much more easily. I wasn't having to fight for them as head of the archives; I was a sympathetic administrator who had to be careful that I didn't show so much favoritism that I would lose my own credibility, and yet knowing- that's a whole other story on how the Wright collection came, but it was already here or on the way- knowing what that would do, in addition to all these other roles that I had been networking for several years to get going, knowing what that collection would do and realizing that there would be unstoppable growth; the place would have had to have flooded badly for the program not to have grown. So I was in a position to be able to help get resources into it without [showing favoritism]- well, maybe other

people who worked here would say something different, people who weren't involved might think I was showing overt favoritism, which I may have. I would say I was showing covert favoritism [laughs], in an area that I knew there was real opportunity. So I spent the last- I'd have to look at my resume- but probably I was really only actively involved for a couple of years, and then I was moved up the food chain, probably for the overall good of the program.

CW: In the early years what kind of services were provided by the archives? Were there any special services apart from the rest of the library?

JW: We did, particularly when we first got the Wright collection. There was a lot of wanting to use it before it even got processed. We did consulting, a lot of consulting with local governments. I went out, Bob spent a lot of time on the road, and I think the microfilming program started after I left, but it may have started right before I left, I don't remember. Bob would know when it started. I left here in May of 1975 so you all would have records that would tell you whether the microfilming program started before then or after then. It's rather embarrassing, because among librarians, I was one of the country's leading experts on microforms at the time, but I don't remember if we started microfilming before I left or after. I just don't remember, I think they may have been in the process of acquiring equipment or looking into what we needed when I left. So there was an awful lot of working with local governments, and when we moved in we were on the third floor, in the two rooms comparable to this [room], right below, with a [?] wall down the middle. One of the rooms was set up more as a reading room with some good furniture and nice display space, and then the other room was virtually all compact storage, because we knew that the only way that we could have any hope of storing anything was to put compact storage in there, so we had movable, compact storage. Dawne [Dawne Dewey, current head of Special Collections and Archives] asked me the other day whether we had begun to take in any local records by the time I left. Once again, I vacillated back and forth between yes and no while I was standing here, and Bob or your own accession records would be a better attest of that that I because by that time I was assistant director and wasn't directly involved. So, while I spent a lot of time down there just getting out of the office and wanting to gab, because I wasn't directly involved in doing the work I don't remember some of the details of what came when and what started when and that sort of thing, except for the Wright collection.

CW: And that's my next question- can you provide a little bit of background on how that collection came to Wright State?

JW: Yes, I can. One day I got a phone call from a guy named Tom Crouch. Tom, at the time, was the head of the education program at the Ohio Historical Society. He was an aviation buff, Tom went on to the Smithsonian where I think when he retired he was head of the aviation branch of the library/archives part of the Smithsonian. He has written on the Wrights. But at the time he was [with] the education program at the Ohio Historical Society and he called me up and he said, "John, there is something you really need to know". He said that there was an awful lot of Wright Brothers material that Ivonette Wright Miller- what was her husband's name? - At any rate, it was in the basement of their house, and when he started to describe it to me, he said, "Here's your problem, however". When the university was founded, in 1968 I guess, the first president was a man named Brage Golding, and the Miller's had approached Golding, offering

him the material, and without consulting the library, according to Tom, his immediate answer to them was, "We don't want that old junk". So, Tom said, "That really offended the family, and the stuff is there but you've got to know that they're not at all happy with Wright State University". Dawne reminded me of this, that by that time we had a new president who had been the dean of the college of business and then became the vice-president for administration, I think, Bob Kegerreis. I contacted Kegerreis' office right away. Well, I went to the director of the library, too, but I went right to Kegerreis' office, told the story, and he was on the phone immediately. He immediately saw the value of what this was and also saw that he had to take an action, and I think probably within an hour of my talking to him, he had already contacted them [and] had made arrangements to meet with them. So shortly thereafter, I went out to their house. They lived in Kettering, in the neighborhood that if you go from Kettering Hospital and drive up some of those streets, eventually you get into Oakwood, some of those nice houses. They lived in Kettering in a ranch house, a big one, and all the stuff was in the basement of their house. So I went there, and they showed me the whole collection, and they were very gracious and so on. We were still in Millett at that time, if I remember correctly, so the building hadn't been finished. But the deal was signed, because Dr. Kegerreis was very distinguished. Distinguished looking, dean of the college of business in those days, he was very well dressed and very well spoken and had immediately smoothed things over. So I met them first, but then Pat Nolan started right after that so when we had moved into the new building and it was time to actually get the collection, Pat was already here, and Pat and Bob actually picked it up and brought it back. Immediately there was a lot of hoopla and a lot of publicity, and we had a reception and there was a retired person from the Smithsonian who had been there- short little guy, what was his name- and there were a lot of funny stories about the Wright collection, because there had been a huge controversy about the patent, and the Smithsonian had backed Samuel Langely. I think that was his name, yes, Samuel P. Langely. At any rate, whoever the person was that we brought in from the Smithsonian to take a look at the collection, Ivonette Miller pulled me aside and said, "He's a partisan of Langely, you know", so there was no love lost between the Wright family and the Smithsonian at that time, and hadn't been for many, many years, going back to the patent wars of the Wrights trying to patent the plane. But we had him in here and we were in the new building at that time, because he was sitting in the reading room and we had the collection so he could look at it, and we had the photographs. Of course as you know or probably know, that at least at the time we thought, and I assume that it was true, that because of the flood- they extensively photo documented everything- their negatives were in the basement, and so some of their negatives were flood damaged [from the 1913 Dayton flood]. The prints were not in the basement, and when the negatives went to the Library of Congress, they did not want the prints. So all of their print collection came here, and there were prints in there for which there were no corresponding negatives or for which the negatives were so flood damaged that they couldn't make anything but a bad print out of them. So, I remember- darn, I can't remember his name- he was a very short gentleman and he was sitting at the table, looking at picture after picture, and all of a sudden he started bouncing up and down in his chair saying, "This is it! This is it!" He had seen a picture he had never seen before, of between 1902 and 1903, I believe, when they had made a modification. You've got the problem of three degrees of freedom and having to control for six things happening in an airplane, and no one had figured that out completely, and apparently there was a point where they had figured out what to do- and I forget whether it's the R or the pitch or which one was hit or miss with previous designs- but he saw it in the picture, and said, "That's it! That's it! This is it!" and he was literally bouncing up and down in his seat.

It was funny to watch, but also very rewarding because we knew this was going to be worth something. Well, we knew it anyhow. So, there were lots of ceremonies and receptions.

CW: A lot of media coverage?

JW: Oh yes, for sure. I mean, Kegerreis was good at that and they had a good publicity department here, and the Miller's were very gracious. You probably never met them, but they were both just as gracious as could be and very nice people. But Ivonette was- I have lots of stories- when she was a little girl, Uncle Orv or Wilbur, I forget which one, took her for a ride, so she was the first child to ride in an airplane, a heavier than air airplane. At least that's what she said, no reason to disbelieve her. So there were lots and lots of stories like that that they would sit around and reminisce about. I remember going to the house for the first time- where's the propeller?

CW: It's in the reading room up front.

JW: Well, it was over their mantle, their fireplace. If I remember correctly, I'm almost certain. When you walked in the house, it was there, prominently displayed. Then there were some trophies and other things that were all prominently displayed, and then the books and the photographic prints and whatever else there was downstairs in their basement. The interesting thing was, the Library of Congress had in those days and probably still has a policy in special collections that it does not take any duplicates. The brothers had spent quite a lot of time doing research, and had subscribed to the Smithsonian publications or got them for free and several other journals, and for a short period there, when they were trying to solve the problem, as you all know, there are marginal notes scribbled throughout. But the Library of Congress kind of offended the family because they already had all those journals and they had a policy of not taking duplicates. I don't know whether anybody from LC [Library of Congress] actually looked in there to see that there was all that marginalia, which to me turned it into a manuscript or at least partially; but if they didn't look, shame on them, and if they did look and decided they were still duplicates, even shamer [sic] on them, because that's how those came here. Because LC had said, "Well, these are duplicates and we don't take duplicates, and if you give them to us we'll just get rid of them", so they weren't going to do that. Then there were Bishop Wright's diaries, and I forget whether they had started to transcribe them. I think maybe they had started but then one of the agreements we had was that we would either do the transcription or finish the transcription as quickly as possible of the diaries. So there were the memorabilia, which normally wouldn't have come in as our collection policy did not have something in it for memorabilia, but there was no question that those things were coming here. This was not an issue, we didn't take a committee meeting to make that decision, there was no soul searching or agonizing or re-writing of policies to make them consistent, no. But Pat was here by then so he would remember much more about it and was much more involved in all the hoopla and the parties. I was involved because I was an administrator so I got to stand around and shake hands with people, and I had met the Miller's initially, so I got a lot of vicarious satisfaction out of it.

CW: I'm guessing people were immediately clamoring to get into that collection.

JW: There's a funny story there that Bob would probably remember better than I because we still were in- maybe we still were over in Millett Hall, but maybe this wasn't the Wright collection. There was a person, some guy who purported to be very rich, and he flew in to see- we must have had some of it then, maybe it was in storage. No, it couldn't have been, Bob and Pat picked it up. So maybe that wasn't connected with the Wright collection, it was a funny story about somebody coming here to do research. Hmm, too many years ago. But yes, there was a clamoring, very much so- people from the university, people outside the university. So there was a very high priority for getting those processed, and of course I saw the finding aid that you re-published, and for a collection like that the level of processing is way beyond what you normally do for a standard collection; you don't normally describe things at the item level, you'd never get done if you did. I had an internship at the archives branch of the federal records center in San Francisco, for the summer before I came to work here, and I inventoried 425 feet of the criminal court records of the Federal District Court of Nevada- when Nevada was still a territory- in about three weeks or something like that. So, you all have records that would show the level of detail. I'm guessing, because it was all Pat and Bob and others by then, but we had also begun to get other people in here, and I don't remember whether they were students or what; The Public History Program hadn't been started yet, we did have one legacy person, a faculty member who, you know, the archives is a traditional parking ground for faculty who are incompetent at whatever else they are doing and they find a spot. We had one of those for a while, and there were others. Somewhere there are personnel records that would say how it grew, but there certainly were student assistants. I suspect that there must have been an initial level of processing that was not at the item level, just to get started on the things and organization, and then maybe going through the collection several times to do deeper level processing. All I know is that I missed the fun, except vicariously.

CW: So did this initially change the collection policy, or were you still focused mainly on local history and not aviation history per se?

JW: Almost immediately it was clear, and it was clear from the beginning to me and I'm sure to Pat and to anyone who stopped and thought about it, that a collection like that, unless you botched it completely, a collection like that would be a magnet. Your accession records would tell you how things began to come in and as I said, I was not directly involved by then. But there was no question that there were already contacts being made, and the realization that not only because that was the Wright collection but because of Dayton that there ought to be a focus on aviation history material, not just local material. So there was no question in my mind and I don't think there would have been any question in anyone's mind that stopped to think about it that that was going to be a nucleus of something that was much more than just local. In conjunction with the Ohio Historical Society, Tom Crouch was doing some oral histories and I did- maybe I only did one- I interviewed an older man who- when the Wrights started their company, Dayton of course had, what was the name of the company? They were the railroad car finishing [company]; they made fancy railroad cars, passenger cars. It was something and Barney; I want to say Smith and Barney but that can't be right. So the finished work on those was done by highly skilled carpenters, real craftsmen. So the Wrights hired- because their airplane was wood and whatever the fabric was and steel and wire, basically it was a wooden structure that needed to be built very well- they hired car finishers from whatever the name of the car company was, to work in the factory. And I interviewed a man who had been retired for a number of years who

had worked for the railroad car company, and went to work for the Wrights then. Somewhere here I assume there's a tape of it, but it was fascinating because he would talk about that when a plane was all put together, then it would have to be tuned. He or another of his fellow workers would get up and lay up in the plane and literally it was like tuning a piano. They'd pluck the tension wires and just feel when everything had the right tension on it, and that's how he described it, just laying and then he'd make a little adjustment and pluck again and then he'd have to go over here and adjust until the thing was just right. But it took people who were real craftsmen to do that kind of work, so many of the people who were hired to do particularly the finish work on the airplanes were people who had worked for the car company, because they were the best woodworkers in town. They were really fine wood craftsmen, and the airplane had to be built and then tuned. He talked about laying up there and you'd have wires running in different directions, and pulling this one and telling someone to tighten that one. The visual imagery from his description is something I've never forgotten. He went on into other things about how the factory was organized, but I don't remember much about that. It's on the tape somewhere. And I thought I interviewed a second, but I don't have any memory of that right now. He was so fascinating he may have crowded out any memories I had of the other one, and I already was up the chain, but this opportunity came along so I prepared for it and did the interview.

CW: Can you talk at all- and I know this may be past the time when you were actively involved- about some other noteworthy collections that came in?

JW: Yes. I remember there was a company in Springfield- why can't I remember the name of it, I grew up right outside of Springfield- one of the major manufacturers up there that made- oh heavens, this is embarrassing. A company that had been in business from the 1830's or something like that that made- oh heck, this is awful. I should have done a little more preparation. It was one of the older companies of Springfield, I think they made stuff connected to water turbines or something like that, for powering mills and that kind of thing. We got the records from that company. It wasn't connected to aviation but it was an important company in the area. And there was always a tease with NCR¹; when I started to work here in 1970, the chair of the university's board of trustees was the CEO of NCR, the vice-chair of the university's board of trustees was the vice-chair of NCR, and the secretary of the board was the attorney or something. So, three of the highest level executives at NCR were also the highest level people on the university board of trustees, and there was always discussion going on about what we could get from NCR. As they were beginning to close down², they had empty floor space and buildings, and there was a man whose name I can't remember anymore who contacted me, and I went to see him because he had been given an assignment to gather together material because they were thinking of doing their own museum. He knew their product line but he didn't know anything at all about documentation, so I spent half a day there talking to him, looking through what they had, mainly to provide advice to him, but I don't think anything ever came of all that stuff. As I said, there was always this tease with NCR and you'd have thought, given the close relationship between the early members of the board of trustees of this institution and their corporate board, that there could have been something happen there. But it was always just this tease. There was also, I had contacted someone from the Cox family to talk, [but] by that time

¹ National Cash Register Company

² National Cash Register did not close

the family was really in Atlanta, it was focused in Atlanta and there was no prayer of getting things here. Oh heavens, because I was not directly involved, there were things- I know that I would walk down the hall just to get away from things and patter, and Bob would show me the thing that had just come in and that they were accessioning, so I knew there were things coming in. I remember the one from Springfield and I should have looked it up before I came because I can't remember the name of the company, it was one that had been there for a long time. But I knew there were collections coming in but I just don't remember what they were, other than that I would walk down and they would show me the latest, and I would say, "Yeah, great. You're running out of room, what are you going to do?" And in fact, if I remember correctly, we already were putting things in storage down in the basement because we had filled up the compact shelving already. I left here and went to Oregon and then I got appointed- well, I was divorced and my kids were still here and my mother and dad were here- and I got appointed to a bunch of OCLC committees and I was constantly coming back to Columbus for meetings, on OCLC's nickel, conveniently, so I would drop in. I remember I dropped in one day, and lo and behold- we're on the fourth floor now- they had taken over the two rooms right above, and I remember because I came in and Bob said, "Well, I'll call Pat", and that was an emergency stairwell out there and all of a sudden he came out of the door. So they had fixed the alarm so that they could get back and forth from the fourth and the third floors without having to set off the alarms, with a key system of some kind or other. So I remember that that space had gone to them, and I think there was both processing and office space, and more storage up there. And I remember they invited me to a party at Bob's house, it was a party for people who worked here, and there must have been seventeen people. I walked in, the party was already going on and there were all these people in the living room, and I stopped and I said, "Every one of you owes me your job, you know." [Laughs] I mean, I was astonished, you know. Then the Public History Program began, that was after I left. I think they may have been talking about it but I was not involved at all at that point.

CW: What would you say are your fondest memories of your time here?

JW: Oh, well, I met my wife here.

CW: Oh, that's a good one.

JW: Let's try that for starters. All institutions were growing like crazy, but Wright State was growing like mad. It got so crazy that we had these very highly educated people in what were classified staff positions, but then between classified staff and faculty- and librarians had faculty rank, I don't know if they still do or not- there was this group of people called "unclassified". In Washington they were called "administrative" and "professional" or something like that, but they fit in between. And the thing about them, because they weren't classified, [end tape 1, begin tape 2], there were no salary scales. You could pay them what they were worth. We had some fairly highly educated people doing some interesting work, so I started working to get some of them out of the classified staff into this unclassified rank where their salary was really set on what their skills were, and as best we could, the market. We did that with about three people, but the university was growing so fast, and the personnel systems weren't automated, or if they were they were crudely automated, and the records keeping couldn't keep up. So three different times I got people out of the classified staff into one of these unclassified positions, and some time

later we'd receive a notice from the personnel people that we had a classified staff vacancy. Because they were growing and they just lost track of the fact that this person had just shifted from here and so there was a vacancy in the classified staff, and I remember the first time it happened, I thought, "Well, let's see how far we can go with this", and darn if I didn't hire somebody. So three different times, we'd move someone up to unclassified and then fill their position, because the personnel records couldn't keep up with it that fast. It was a young, growing institution and I actually got to take quite a few risks that were maybe foolhardy, but we could do it because there was nobody to say no; there weren't too many traditions to overcome. Certainly during the time that I was involved with that Ohio network, that was growing, too, and I don't know how that works today, but it was so actively cooperative in those days that- and I remember finding a collection of some kind or other that really was related to something in the Cleveland area- we were so cooperative that a lot of times one area would find something, help make all the arrangements and even pick the stuff up. So there was no sense of territoriality, you know, "I found this so it's mine". There was a realization that there was more stuff out there than any of us could ever get and that by cooperating we're going to be much more effective than not. So there was a real dynamism there. As I said, we moved into the new building and as ungainly as it was to try to make it work, it was a really spectacular building. Furnished in the style of the day, which meant orange carpet, and at night, when that carpet was new, at night if you went outside to that huge window wall, the glow that came out of there was really amazing, actually. And we bought good furniture- I've had back trouble since I was nineteen and I will not sit in an uncomfortable chair, and so we were working with an architect for this new building, and the interior designer, this was her first professional job. We had a conference room, and she had found a table she wanted to put in this conference room and she actually, on the blueprints, she drew the table through the wall that was there; that didn't stop her. This was the table she wanted and the fact that there was a wall there didn't matter; she actually had it drawn through the wall. The lady was a little flaky. And the chairs she wanted to buy would have lasted about three months; the students would have torn them apart. So, we bought good furniture. So we had this building that looked nice and had good stuff in it, and the students really appreciated that. The other thing is that right from the beginning we had a very active library instruction program; lots of hours spent in the classroom teaching. Then as assistant director, I just kept hiring. There were just lots of good, young librarians on the market out there and it was just a ball to recruit; hiring good, fun people who were hard workers and dynamic. It was an awfully good experience for me, actually, of a type that I probably couldn't have gotten had I gone to a different, older, more established place. Because that kind of growth and that kind of opportunity just to keep building, and, you know, the collections had to be built, the services had to be built, the relations with the faculty had to be built, so it was a lot of fun from that point of view.

CW: Is there anything else you'd like to tell us about your experiences here? We're about at the end of our interview here, but I don't know if there's anything I didn't ask you about or any memories that pop out of your times here that you might want to share with us?

JW: This has nothing to do with special collections, but because of the original ties with Ohio State- Hugh Atkinson was the library director at Ohio State at that time, and ALA, you may or may not know, the American Library Association has an award named after Hugh Atkinson because he was one of the really dynamic academic library directors who has ever existed in the country. He went from here to the University of Illinois, where he did wonders, and then

tragically, he got a brain tumor and died at a relatively young age. But he was an innovator. He built the network in Illinois. He and I were on OCLC [council]- it's now called members council or users council- together, and he was very proud of the fact that the University of Illinois borrowed more from the three smallest public libraries in Illinois than it lent to them. But he had been at Ohio State and Ohio State was starting all kinds of programs, computer-based current awareness programs in the sciences. And I heard a rumor that they were going to try this, and if it was successful, then he would extend the service to other state institutions. So we got in touch with Ohio State right away, with the people in their science libraries, and said, "While you're testing it, why don't you also test the concept of providing the service to another campus". We had fifty faculty members in science and engineering to whom we started providing this current awareness service that Ohio State was doing, and it was wildly successful. It was just that kind of thing that we had the opportunity to do and there was nobody to say no, and you didn't have to have too many committee meetings. In fact, for that one we had no committee meetings. There were lots of opportunities here to do things, partly because of the lack of tradition, although we had our bureaucracies. To me it seemed slow, but in retrospect I realized that we could move really fast compared to as I got along in my career and into older institutions and more bureaucratic institutions, larger institutions. There are some very interesting stories, here again having nothing to do with special collections. Jim Dodson was on sabbatical the year before I came here. He went to England and the English libraries were ahead in building online catalogs, but the way they did it was they had all these short records, so you just punched it in and went on. So, OCLC had just started and Wright State was the first library to do a retrospective conversion of its entire collection. But the decision was made not to input the full bibliographic record. In fact they didn't even input I think it was either publisher or place of publication, not to mention some of the other stuff. I was head of Archives and Special Collections, but I was the only member of the library faculty to argue against this, and I was told that I didn't understand. When all else failed, I said, "Look, working the reference desk late at night, a student is working on a term paper due the next day, they realize they didn't write down all the bibliographic information, and I can't even go to the catalog to give them [I think it was] the place of publication". You know, the publisher was there but not the place of publication. We can't even from our own catalog give them the information they need for a citation. So we have to go get the book, but what if the book isn't there? But I was told I didn't understand. That's when I was head of Archives and Special Collections. So Wright State did this retrospective conversion using brief records and became infamous across the country for these garbage records in there. By that time I was head or assistant director for Public Services and we had done the retrospective conversion, and our interlibrary loan librarian, who at the time was half-time or six-tenths time or something like that, and we lent almost nothing and borrowed, you know, her job was to borrow. As soon as those records went into OCLC- and this was before the advent of OCLC's interlibrary loan system but you could still search and find- interlibrary loan librarians all over the country discovered these things, and we were getting interlibrary loan requests from Harvard and all over the country. I would go off to meetings and step into an elevator at an American Library Association meeting, and I had a thing that said Wright State University and there were immediately these sneers about these bibliographic short records. I was head of Public Services, and I'd look at them and say, "Where are you? Okay, we received three interlibrary loan requests from you two weeks ago, and I'll just go back and tell our interlibrary loan librarian that because our records are dirty, you don't want to borrow those books from us. I'm just going to make sure we don't send you any of this stuff, because we don't want to taint

[you]”. And I remember the first time she got a request from Harvard, she came running into my office waving this piece of paper, “We just got an interlibrary loan request from Harvard!” The other thing was, and I think the reason my picture is on the wall out there, is we had a fire when we were still in Millett. It was in a basement room where unbound journals were gathered together to get ready to ship to the bindery and then the bindery shipments came back in, so it was a shipping and receiving room. The custodial staff in those days worked at night and what had happened, we eventually found out, was that a custodian smoking down there got up to go away and had left a cigarette on the edge of a table, it burned to a certain point and dropped into a wastebasket and started a fire. This was a very small room, like these chopped up rooms on the end, only even smaller. There was wall mounted shelving and heavy, bound volumes, and books that had been received there, too, and microfilms. So this trashcan erupted into flame, it got hot enough so that some of the shelves began to buckle and dump some of the books off. It snuffed out the fire, almost. It smoldered away, eventually caught fire again, bigger fire, more stuff fell off, put it out, smoldered, you know. This went on- they know when the custodians were there- so this probably went on for five or six hours, maybe longer. I remember getting a call early in the morning there was a fire in the library, because someone had seen smoke coming out of Oelman Hall, I believe it was, because of the tunnel system, so the fire department had no idea where the smoke was coming from because I think the smoke was coming out of Oelman but the fire was in the basement of Millett. So, there was one special collection in there, there were bound journals and some books that were gifts and I don’t know what all. I knew enough about conservation to know that- of course the fire department came in and [makes spraying noise] they were all wet, so what were we going to do with them? Until we could evaluate them, I knew that we needed to get the things frozen. Somehow we got a freezer in here right away and stacked them in to freeze them, and that led to enough publicity to get me interviewed by the radio and TV stations and in the newspapers and all that. Then, when the tornado hit Xenia in 1974, of course it devastated downtown Xenia, but it also went right through the middle of the Central State campus, and while the media was focused on Xenia, Central State was wiped out. The library at Central State in those days was a two story building with a basement. The next morning, Kegerreis called the library director and he said that they had really been wiped out and could they get a crew of people out there. I think it was the next day, I don’t remember how many of us went over there, and the second floor of that library was basically gone: the walls. But the tables were still there and the chairs were still there and there were still books left lying on the tables, and the stacks were still there. The books were still on the stacks but you would see pieces of glass from the window; the glass might be this long and have a sharp edge driven straight into the spine of the book. Their special collections, they had a basement that had gotten flooded and the stairway blocked. They had on the façade between the first and second floors there were these huge concrete blocks, and when it blew off the first floor it also took some of those concrete blocks out. There was one laying [sic] blocking a stairway and six of us couldn’t even begin to budge it. There were concrete blocks like that laying [sic] across the street. The next morning was bright and sunny but kind of breezy. That old building with the windows blown out completely had Venetian blinds down and just rattling in the wind. There was an oak tree out front with a car wrapped around it- the assistant director of the library’s car was wrapped around it- but a Venetian blind from one of those slats was just driven straight into that oak tree. But we went over there and we took university trucks, we had lots of plastic bags, we bagged up stuff to get it out of the destruction, we brought it back here and we contacted HEW [Department of Health, Education and Welfare]. I don’t know what it is, it’s not HEW anymore, but they had

regions. Every part of the country is divided into a federal region and we were in I forget which region, but the headquarters was in Chicago. There was a librarian on each one of those regional staffs, and I knew that, and I think it was Pat who actually made the contact but I knew to get in touch with them. They hopped into action and found at McDonnell Douglas in St. Louis that they had these large, vacuum freeze drying facilities that literally you could drive a truck into. Here again, I think Pat did all the contacts here, got some local trucking company to loan us freezer trucks, the stuff was loaded into those freezer trucks and then taken to St. Louis and then the trucks were just pulled right in. I think that's how it went, I didn't make the trip to those large, freeze drying bays. So the books were then, to the extent possible, dried and at the same time not damaged. But even the day we came back- when Wright State was founded there was a lot of controversy because the Dayton city fathers wanted a university here. Well, Central State was just right over there. Why didn't the state put the resources into building up Central State instead of founding a separate university here? You can guess the answer: racism. Well, that's my opinion. That was the opinion of a lot of people. So we went over there, we sent a crew over, and we got back and I actually got a hand written note from Kegerreis thanking us, and he also called and basically his instruction was, "Do this" and "Thank you". And I thought, "Well gee, we've really done something with this large scale freeze drying. We'll get in a bunch of publications for this". Kegerreis said, "Nope. No publicity out of this. We did it, and thank you, but we're not going to do that. Take pride in the fact that you've done good work and it doesn't go any further than that". So, I think most of us spent just one day over there but we managed to get the stuff. Everybody that worked there, many of them had lost their homes and so on, they were in shock. I mean, I knew the assistant director, and there his car was wrapped around the tree, and he was there the next day. He lived on a farm somewhere out there. He was just wandering around in a daze, and for most of the people there, either their own lives had been effected directly or the lives of people they knew and families, so we really got in and got out as fast as we could, to just get the stuff out of there. Their special collections was at risk and we particularly concentrated on that stuff and got what we thought was the most valuable stuff. We already had a freezer because of our own problem, so we immediately put all the stuff that we thought was the most valuable right into that freezer. And actually there was too much, so Pat had made arrangements, here again I think it was with a trucking company. No, it was a food processing company that happened to have an empty freezer that it could loan us, so we put stuff in there temporarily until it was hauled off to St. Louis. So, that was something that happened here about which there was no publicity, deliberately, and I don't think there was ever any publicity of what we did there. It was because there were an awful lot of hard feelings about the establishment of Wright State when Central State was so close by.

CW: Okay. Well, John, I think we are about out of time. We want to thank you very much for coming in and sharing your memories about the establishment of the archives and the early years of the libraries and Wright State with us. We truly appreciate your time and your perspectives, so thank you very much.

JW: You're welcome. It was a pleasure. And probably I'll remember all kinds of other things.
[Laughs]