The National Personnel Records Center  
Fire of July 12, 1973  

Presentation by Rex Frandsen  
To  
The Mormon Pacific Historical Society  
Mar. 18, 1995  

I will use as my main references for this presentation, a document prepared by Patricia Tesler and Karen Swobody entitled: Administrative History of the National Personnel Records Center and an article from The American Archivist, Oct. 1994 issue, titled “The National Personnel Records Center Fire: A Study In Disaster”. The article was written by Walter W. Stender and Evans Walker.

The question has been asked “What does this topic have to do with MPHS?” I suppose that I could answer by asking “What dose Iniki have to do with MPHS?” The answer to both is that large amounts of records, personal or other wise were lost or destroyed.

In the case of the Records Center fire, the impact on Hawaii and the Pacific is that US Government employees and Military personnel records up to the year 1973 may not be complete or even available for research and more particularly for genealogical purposes.

Following WW II there was great concern in the federal government on the subject of records management. This led to the Executive Order 9784 of 1946, which directed each agency to develop and active records management program and to dispose of useless records. It also required the transfer of records of enduring value to the National Archives. “This concept emphasized a reduction in the creation of unnecessary
papers, proper identification and filing, and greater involvement with past, present and future documentation."

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

Several federal agencies tried or experimented with the concept of low cost record centers to house their records. "The Army and Navy pioneered such programs. They established repositories which combined the idea of an economical center for the storage of records of marginal value, the concept of regional archival repositories, and the hall of records approach of inexpensively dealing with semiactive records."

In 1943 there was another important change in military record keeping. The War Department ordered, effective on July 6th, only one personnel folder would be kept for each of its employees. The past practice of creating multiple folders had greatly added to the mass of records which the department had to store.

In spite of its efforts to consolidate records there was much to be done. In 1950 there were 22,950 locations for federal records of former employees. Pay records were filed in nearly 5000 sites and a wide variety of inconsistencies existed in the handling of the accumulated records. This made it practically impossible for the lay person (such as you and me) to do research simply because he or she did not know where to locate the records needed.
In 1949 we saw the end of the War Department and the creation of the Department of Defence and the Office of the Secretary of Defence. The Secretary of Defence was given authority and control over the military departments of Army, Navy and Air Force and the responsibility for civilian employee records.

On Dec. 4, 1950, Secretary of Defence, George C. Marshal recommended that the General Services Administration assume custody of the personnel records of former civilian employees. The proposal was accepted Apr. 25, 1951. By 1955 thousands of cubic feet of personnel records had been gathered and stored in the Butler Brothers Building in St. Louis. Prior to this time, it took 360 full time and 200 part time employees to maintain and service just the government employees records. This did not include the millions of military records. By centralizing the non military records, a staff of only 260 full time workers was needed to maintained the records. Further consolidation brought other changes and a new building for the civilian records. It was located on the old Marine Hospital site in So. St. Louis. The only problem was that the building contained only 443,534 Sq. Ft. When the Civilian Records were transferred to the new facility there were 460,000 cubic feet of records. They were out of space before they started.

About this same time another building was conceived to consolidate all armed forces personnel records into one facility. After years of planning a second record center was built by the Army Corp of Engineers in St. Louis. It was a 6 story structure, 728 ft. long and 282 ft. wide. It contained 1,240,000 sq. ft. and cost 12.5 million dollars. It would house all personnel records for those in the armed forces.

The architecture of the building was a curious blend of office space and a warehouse. There was some obvious problems with the building. The most notable was the lack of provisions for fire safety. Offices were on the ends of each floor. From the 3rd floor up there were large unbroken spaces, consisting of 200,000 sq. Ft. on each floor. There were no fire walls. Oddly, it was early in 1973, that the National Archives had made a decision that all future records buildings would be equipped
with sprinklers and smoke detectors.

This new building was to house the Army, Navy and Air Force personnel records with a common reference and service staff. In reality it was 3 separate record centers --each branch of the service on a separate floor. It was not an easy task to find a record because there was no common locator file and each branch had their own way of storing the records.

Gradually a system was worked out to reference the records. About this time (1972-73) the Coast Guard's and the Marine Corps' records were also sent to the center and had to be merged with the rest. The system in place was cumbersome at best.

The new acquisitions made the demand for a more efficient system a high priority of the top management. The new system that was finally worked out was one of straight sequential order number to each accession. This system allowed for intellectual control over the records as well.

With a center so massive not only in space but also in its mission, a work force of 2200 full time employees was needed. This was not unexpected as the building was built for a maximum of 4000 employees in mind.

On July 12, 1973 another milestone event for the Records Center happened. A disastrous fire. Although disasters were not uncommon to the history of the U.S. Government records, this fire was by far the greatest of them all. There were more than 52,000,000 records processed and in the building on this date.

It was at 16 minutes past midnight, when the first alarm reached the North Central County Fire Alarm System Inc.. They served as the communication link of the fire departments of the area. The call came from the Olivette Fire Company. 20 seconds later, another alarm was received via the direct fire phone located at the center. This one was from a guard who had been notified of the fire by an unidentified motorcyclist passing the building.
The calls prompted the dispatch of 3 pumper trucks and 2 other emergency vehicles. The trucks arrived 4 Min. and 20 seconds after the first alarm sounded. By 12:34 AM there was at least 1 fireman on the 5th floor and reporting heavy smoke and extreme heat coming from the 6th floor. At 1:34 AM the sixth alarm had been sounded. Eventually 42 fire districts were involved in fighting the fire.

The initial efforts in fighting the fire were with snorkels pouring water from the external perimeters of the building and hose companies on the 6th floor. At 1:05 AM a fireman reported smoke so heavy they could not find the source of the fire. Men remained on the 6th floor until 3:15 AM at which time conditions forced the firemen from the 6th floor and the internal fighting of the fire had to be abandoned.

By 6:00 AM the fire companies on the scene were having difficulty getting sufficient water pressure and a call at 6:12 AM went to the water company to increase the pressure if at all possible. Eight minutes later fire had spread across the entire length of the building. Just before 9:00 AM another call went out to increase the water pressure but by 10:31 the entire roof was on fire. By 11:22 the West wall of the 6th floor was leaning 6 to 8 inches from the vertical.

All through the day the firemen were fighting two battles: One with the fire, the other with low water pressure. By flooding the 6th floor continuously with water on the 13th of July, the firemen were able to contain the fire to the top floor.

Finally on July 14th at 2:44 AM firemen could get on to the 6th floor. Equipment failures—particularly with the pumper trucks which had been pumping now for more that 48 hours, began to plague the firemen.

On July 15, heavy smoke began to pour from the south west corner of the building and efforts were diverted to that section of the building. By July 16th the fire was under control and fire companies began to leave. Leaving one company on the scene to
put out small fires which kept starting up.

Many decisions had to be made during the 4 day fire. One had far reaching effects on the government. That was to stop the daily shipment of thousands of records to the center—to say nothing of the thousands of requests that came by mail.

On July 12, vital operating records, computer tapes and microfilm were removed during the fire. A program began immediately for salvaging the remaining records. An off site computer center was set up so that some activity could continue but it was minimal. Most of the Center's personnel were placed on administrative leave but many returned as volunteers to help. A temporary office was set up adjacent to the building.

Access to the 6th floor was paramount. It was not known what records if anything had survived. First impressions was that everything had been destroyed. Large reinforced concrete columns were sheared off, causing the roof to collapse, shelving units were twisted by the heat and only a small bread loaf sized chunk of ash remained of what had once been 6 Federal Records Center Cartons. Rows and rows of cabinets that once contained IBM tab cards were melted away. In some areas, the file cabinets supported the fallen roof. Other file cabinets seemingly intact, held only small chard piles of ash. Isles between the stacks were piled with debris up to 3 feet deep and several inches of water remained on the floor.

Water caused the most serious problem in the center. Millions of gallons were poured into the fire and every floor had several inches of water standing on the floor. Because of the climatic conditions of St. Louis, coupled with the water in the center, conditions were ripe for the growth of mold. A thymol solution was sprayed though out the building. Water still poured down through the building for days. Partly because some fires were rekindled and contract firemen poured more and more water into the center.

The fire had ruined the electrical system of the building. Elevators and escalators were heavily damaged. A spirit of
ingenuity came into play when it was discovered that when the handrails of the escalators were covered with liquid detergent, they made an excellent conveyor belts for the heavy water soaked records.

Reclaiming and salvaging records brought many ideas as to how to best deal with the situation. There were some interesting ways of drying the records. Plastic milk cartons emerged as the ideal containers. As the records were removed, they were again sprayed with thymol and then placed in plastic milk cartons for open air drying.

Within a few days the National Archives and Records System discovered the existence of a vacuum drying facility at a near by McDonald Douglas Aircraft Corp. in St. Louis. This chamber was used by NASA to conduct simulated conditions is outer space. This is not to be confused with the freeze drying process as we know today, however. A large amount of the records were then sent to NASA for drying. Only 10% of the 22 Million personnel jackets stored on the 6th floor was salvaged.

Immediately efforts began to reconstruct the lost records. Every possible avenue was searched-hospital, dental, Social Security, and office records from possible past employers. Some have been fairly well reconstructed, others will be lost forever.

The Building was rehabilitated with the 6th floor being completely removed. Fire walls were constructed throughout. Sprinkling systems were installed along with smoke detectors. Offices were modernized and air conditioning was added to the building to minimized the growth of mold spores already in the documents. Since the fire all Federal archives and record centers have been brought up to standard.

As we can see, even in devastating fires there is some good that can be found. We have only looked at a very superficial history of the center today. There is much more to learn and to study. Yes there has been several investigations into the cause of the fire. None have been conclusive. Only speculation. The one that