

Jenifer Baker – Oral History Transcription

Interviewee: **Jenifer Baker** (former deputy archivist)

Interviewers: **Tori Otten** (archival specialist), **Jackob Stickel** (imaging specialist), **Jennifer Conover** (records center director)

Date of Interview: 7 June 2023

List of Initials: TO = Tori Otten, JB = Jenifer Baker, JC = Jennifer Conover, JS = Jacob Stickel

Location of Interview: Warren County Admin Building in Lebanon, Ohio

Transcriber: Ted Hitchens (Records Specialist)

[Begin transcription 00:00:01]

TO: Hello, my name is Tori Otten. I am the archival specialist at the Warren County Records Center and Archives. Today is Wednesday, June 7th, 2023 and we are here for the Warren County oral history project. I am here today with—

JS: Jacob Stickel, I am the imaging specialist.

JC: I am Jen Haney-Conover, I am the director of the Records Center and Archives.

TO: And today we will have our guest introduce herself.

JB: I am Jenifer Baker, I am the deputy archivist for Warren County Records Center and Archives.

TO: So to get into some general background questions today, can you tell us about your early life such as where you grew up and where you went to school?

JB: So I grew up in the Middletown and Monroe (Ohio) area. I kind of went to school at both of those locations. I graduated from Monroe High School in 2001, and then I essentially lived in Middletown after that.

TO: And did you have any jobs prior to working for Warren County?

JB: Yeah, so after I graduated from Miami University with my degree in history, I worked briefly at Abercrombie & Fitch as a retail manager and then I went to Golf Galaxy for about eight years as a retail manager as well. And then prior to my employment here, I worked as a client care administrator for Standard Register for a few years while I finished my Master's degree from Wright State in public history.

TO: It's been quite the ride to get here. So getting into more of the department focused questions, how did you find yourself working for Warren County? How did you end up here?

JB: So I was close to graduation with my Master's degree and I took the longer path to get my degree, so I went part-time and leading up to the last semester at Wright State, I was keeping an eye out for any internship opportunities because it was required to graduate. So that's when I came across the advertisement. I think it was in an email that out regularly to students about the internship opportunity with Warren County. And it was paid, so that was exceptionally exciting because I thought it was going to take me forever to finish an unpaid internship because I was working full time as well, so I ran across the internship and that's how I found the position, so...

TO: And here you are.

JB: Yeah.

JS: Allright, and how long did you work here and what year did you start?

JB: So I started in January of 2015 as the archival intern. I worked as the intern until I was offered a full-time position as the deputy archivist in May of 2015. So that was my first summer full-time and I've been a full-time employee since as the deputy archivist.

TO: And knowing a bit about your job already, where did you work during your time?

JB: So I worked with the Records Center & Archives the entire eight and a half years that I've been employed with Warren County.

TO: And where was that located?

JB: So we are located in the basement of the Administration Building at 406 Justice Drive (*Lebanon, Ohio*) and we've been in that location since the building was built.

JS: Alright, and can you share with us your journey from records center intern to deputy archivist?

JB: Yeah so when I was hired, I had a couple of projects that I was tasked with, so one of those was to scan our old Common Pleas estate records. They are some of the oldest records that we house at the Warren County Records Center. They are also one of the most accessed records because they are so historic and then also used so much, Jen Haney-Conover, the – my brain just went blank – my boss, Jen Haney-Conover, she wanted to digitize those and then make them available to researchers online so that we didn't have to access them as much because of the paper being so old. And then also to make it easier for people to research those records without actually having to reach out to the Warren County Records Center and Archives. Because if somebody wanted to research in those, we would have to pull each record as we get those requests, and then either scan them or copy them. So just trying to minimize any light damage to those or anyone handling them. So that was one of the projects that I started on as an intern – it actually took me years to finally finish that.

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JB: I actually don't think I actually finished that project fully until I think it was 2021 when it was one-hundred percent complete. I mean we were able to upload as we were working on it, but it did take kind of a backseat once I did become a full-time employee. But it is complete now which is exciting. And then the other project that I worked on was I created our disaster recovery manual which was very interesting to start out with as an intern because I was working with outside departments that I did not know any of those people, so it was kind of a collaborative project that Jen and I worked on together. But that was exciting because I was able to—I find out a lot about Warren County during that process, but also, like I said, I met a lot of new people within the county. Yeah, so those were mainly the things that I worked on as an intern. And then thankfully, Jen was able to create position for me within the Records Center and Archives as the deputy archivist and then the position just kind of grew from that.

TO: So what do you think is something that people don't understand or know about your role that you've had?

JB: So my position at the records center is a little interesting just because it was kind of created as Jen's think tank baby, you know, kind of the ideas that she wanted to develop at the records center. She kind of put all of those ideas into my position. And it has a lot to do with the historic records, but we also as a whole we do a lot with new records as well. You know, we've worked on the inventory system which has kind of revolutionized how our department is functioning within the county which is really cool. You know, we've learned a lot about the records that we're housing for other departments. But we've also helped them learn a lot about their records as well, so I think that's probably something that – if you were looking at my position – wouldn't realize that I do. So not only the historic records, but also the current records for the county.

TO: So with the county, you get more of the older side of it and with the public more the newer side I suppose with the current offices. But with the public you tend to get an older view, so what did you find your relationship with the public to be like?

JB: So coming from retail management, which generally you're just putting out fires all day long! As the manager, you know you're the person they want to talk to when there's an issue. That's what I was used to when dealing with the public. I mean, we also had really great customers that came in all the time. But working for the records center and dealing with the public is generally just always so pleasant because people are looking for information about their—most of the time it's their genealogical information that they're looking for and they're just excited about what they're looking for, so that's fun to deal with them. But also they just have cool stories to share. So these people are doing the research, they have awesome stories, they've got interesting ancestors or relatives. Sometimes you find some weird stuff about them. You know, there are some criminal cases that have existed that I've helped people find that tell a much different story than when people initially try to do research. So just in general, the people that we deal with on a daily basis, they're just really amazing individuals. It's been awesome to help them.

JS: Well nice! What are some other requests you get from patrons other than the genealogical stuff?

JB: So, we are kind of the directory for the county. We do only provide historic records to the public, but because we have the title of records center, when people are searching for their records online, they just automatically assume that we have everything – which is fine because we really enjoy finding the right places for people to go. So I get a lot of requests for where to find marriage records – current marriage records, current divorce records. A lot of 9-1-1 calls which are weird. We got a lot of police report requests and stuff like that. So in general, aside from the historic stuff where people are looking up their house histories or their genealogical information, I mostly just direct people to other departments.

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JB: The U.S. updated their license requirements to travel. I believe it started maybe around 2018 when the transition began. But we get a lot of requests for people having to track any name changes or if women get married (and) they have to provide a marriage record, then if they get divorced... So yeah, we get a lot of marriage and divorce record requests.

TO: Okay, so we've talked about what your most common requests from patrons, so what besides records requests have you focused on?

JB: So I've done everything from processing historic records collections when they transferred all of the records to the Records Center when the building was built. A lot of those collections had been stored in historic storage bins, so one of the things we've worked on is taking all of those historic records that

were folded up and put into little bundles. We processed those and stored them archivally. I was the person who took over our public outreach program. So when I was an intern—I'm sorry, when I first started full-time, we had an intern hired for the summer, Shelby Beatty, she essentially set up all of the Facebook. She set up our Facebook, she set up our education outreach program, she also set up our blog as well. So once she was done for the summer, I (kind of took over). She did the very basics of creating all of those and one of my- one of the most important things I've done for the Records Center is I've taken that and I've grown it. You know, to this point I've seen almost every school district within Warren County, so I go out to the schools and I present about what we do at the archives, kind of what our job is, and then hopefully while I'm doing that, I'm teaching the children how they can utilize the archives at Warren County or even outside archives for their future schooling. So that's been a huge part of what I've done.

JB: And then like I said, I also run all of our social media so sharing with the public what we are doing at the archives, I don't think that a lot of people even within the county knew that we existed. You know, we've kind of grown prior to me being there, and since I've been with Warren County we've grown the Records Center and Archives from something that didn't exist at all to now we store records for all of the departments within the county. But then, like I said, as my position we also are out in the community trying to make those connections with the local schools, with the general public, also with other historical societies. So that is a huge part of what I've done at the archives. It's just trying to get establish those relationships and getting out into the community so that people know what we are, what we do, and then what we can help them with.

TO: Wow, a whole lot of stuff.

JB: Yeah!

TO: So speaking a bit of the evolution of the educational outreach program, what was it like going into the schools at the beginning versus where you've gotten to now?

JB: Yeah. So, I got really fortunate that one of the teachers at J. F. Burns Elementary School- I essentially built a contact list for each different school district and then I kind of just blasted all of the teachers, just letting them know that we have this free program where we will come in and try to help support your current lesson plans essentially. So supporting it via looking up what the requirements are for the State of Ohio for, say, history or social studies. So we try to tailor what we've done for them via what they're already teaching in the classroom ... I had a third grad teacher reach out to me. So once we kind of got our foot in the door, we took some pictures and then I was able to share that we had already gotten into the classroom. That was spring of 2016. So I used that experience to try to showcase it to other teachers within Warren County, showing them "hey this is completely free. Like we will come in and we will teach your students about what primary and secondary sources are."

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JB: So every year up through the pandemic it has grown significantly. Most of the time when I am teaching the students about what we do, it's usually third and fourth graders because they are doing local history. And then I will present to all of the third graders at one school district and I do that a lot, so I see a lot of the students all at once.

TO: So, obviously going to these different schools, different regulations, have you found a particular subject matter that's been the most rewarding for you to teach about, or perhaps even the most fun to teach about?

JB: Yeah, so when I teach the students I've created a few different things that I take with us. We have a historic map and then we have some 1950's aerial photographs, and then I have our map department print out a current GPS picture of the area where these kids go to school. So they get real excited when you can connect what you're teaching them to where they are. So I like using those maps to show them how you can tell change over time in this area because most of it was farmland until recently, so that is probably one of the most fun things to do with them because, like I said, they try to find their houses and what used to be there. And then also, we have a house inventory that I found that just has the coolest list of stuff on it from the 1830's, I believe. So it's really exciting to see them go through that list of items and try to figure out what they are because that kind of shows them that I don't know what most of these things are and I had to look up the information. So just watching the kids get engaged in stuff that we have, and then also ask questions and focus the whole time – like it's just really exciting and fun to watch.

JS: What was the evolution of the social media campaign during your time?

JB: So like I said, I did not create the accounts specifically but I was the person who took over pretty quickly after they were created. I didn't know much about creating a social media presence for a business. But I just kind of took stuff that I thought was really interesting that we do. Or as we are processing collections, I've worked with Tori a lot on- if she's finding cool stuff while processing things, just making sure that we're sharing that with the general public. We have a lot of cool stuff, but on the surface I always say it seems very basic and very boring when you say "we have court records or marriage records." They seem very basic and just boring at first. But once you start digging into these people's lives, you can really tell the whole collective story. That's how I've got about growing our social media. And then like I said, just sharing what we're doing – different projects we're working on, we do the Community Shred Days, so making sure we're creating events for that, and showcasing what we offer to the public in general.

TO: So, you're speaking of that some of our collections tend to outwardly seem boring. However, do you have a favorite of all of these collections?

JB: Yeah. So I think ... And honestly that's hard to choose because they're so different. One of the things that I've been working on trying to get available to the public is our marriage consents. I don't know why I like these ones so much, but I think it's because when I get people looking for family connections they want to see our early marriage records.

JB: But our early marriage records have the most basic information available so they have the groom, the bride, the person who signed off on the marriage and the date and that's essentially it. So when people are looking for parents, those names don't generally populate in stuff like a will because people's parents are usually dead before they are. So when you're trying to find those people's parents, these little marriage consents – and they're only about yea big each (*about the size of a post-it*) – they have a lot of information and they were generally written by the people who are giving consent. So I find them so fascinating because those parental ties are really hard to find for some people doing genealogical research. Also, they're little teeny-tiny pieces of paper that are extremely delicate and I don't like to touch them. So I've been working on digitizing those and creating and index so it's easier for people to tie all their family members together.

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TO: It almost sounds like they are, to an extent, under-utilized by the masses because they're and unknown entity, but have you found any other collections that – in your opinion – are under-utilized?

JB: I've recently starting doing a little bit more house histories for people. The housing market boomed during the Covid pandemic, so a lot of people want house histories which are almost impossible to do. It's very hard to prove when a structure was built especially before in the 1800's even up through the mid-1900's can be difficult. So I think one of the things that I worked on is we created indexes for deed records. You can go to the Recorder's Office and see the deed records that have been digitized. But I think combining that information with information in the tax records to try to tell those house histories – using that as a process – has been under-utilized at this point. Usually I've just been directing people to the deed records specifically or the tax records, but I've found combining those together has been extremely helpful in putting the whole story together.

TO: Knowing some of your personal experience here and especially talking about how searching and this and that, you've creating many exhibits utilizing these materials over the years. So do you recall which exhibits were created during your time and perhaps even which one was your favorite? If you can narrow it down...

JB: Yeah so, I worked on I want to say eight or nine total exhibits. Early on, we did an exhibit on the Warren County Infirmary which is the historic building that sits right behind the Administration Building. It's not the Warren County Health Department (*416 S. East Street*). That one will always be my favorite because it was the first one that I did. I got to work on it with Tori and Shelby, the interns at the time. And also while researching that exhibit I found a forgotten time capsule that was stored in the cornerstone of it, and I actually found that information a year before it turned 100. So like my first year

of being a fulltime employee, I found a time capsule while doing research! But then we also got to create a committee within the county to extract the time capsule and we opened it in front of the public during a special commissioners meeting once that time capsule hit 100 years old. So that's probably my favorite just because of that story.

JB: Since then, we've done smaller exhibits on Prohibition. We've done an exhibit on Foster's Crossing (and) Kings Mills. We had our interns mostly do an exhibit on the Mary Haven children's home. We've also done exhibits – let's see if I can remember all of them – we did one about the first twenty years of the Records Center. That one was really fun because I learned a lot about the Records Center that I didn't really know ahead of that. Probably one of the most challenging exhibits that I did to date was the Warren County Common Pleas Court building; it's the first permanent wall-exhibit that we did. I didn't do most of the research on that but I did primarily the design aspect of it which was mostly done digitally, so that was really challenging but that's probably one of the coolest-looking ones because it takes up an entire wall. It has like 3-dimensional aspects to it. So yeah, I think that's mostly the exhibits. I've probably forgotten some.

TO: To my recollection (of) ones you have worked on as well – Board of Elections, and that was done with one of our interns at the time as well and then you also did a Prohibition exhibit.

JB: Yeah. So Ted and I ... Ted, the records center assistant, he helped me with the Prohibition one. So yeah, it's been really cool to piece together Warren County's history and I've learned a lot.

JS: Are there any other memorable projects you've held over the years?

JB: Yeah! I think one that sticks out – well, I guess a couple actually. We did one of the exhibits that I forgot about until just now, we did an exhibit on the Silver Street Jail. That building, when I first started, the electric and water had been turned off so it kind of just sat vacant for quite a while.

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JB: And then I feel like through our interest and the interest of other people within the county and then combined with the exhibit that we worked on, they have since stabilized that building and tried to at least get it to where it could possibly be utilized in the future. Once it wasn't a jail, it housed offices in there temporarily but it's really cool that we got to go through the building and then, like I said, they've managed to stabilize it at this point, so for the future it should be pretty well preserved and set, which is exciting because I hate to see old buildings go to waste. And then the other thing that we got to work on was Lady Justice (statue) that was on the old courthouse, she was looking like rough shape. She had bullet holes in her! So apparently they used to let people shoot birds because they were such a nuisance in the city. So Lady Justice, she had some bullet holes, she was extremely discolored, she had lost her sword and scales over the years I believe. So through out outreach and through working with the other departments, we are like the go-to for historic research. So they let us work with them on that project

so we could figure out what color she should be painted, and then just trying to put her history together in general. But then we also got to go onsite when they reinstalled her, so Tori got to go up in the attic where she was placed and Jen and I were taking photographs and video from ground level. So just seeing our department get out into the community has been really exciting. And those are two projects that we worked on that were pretty awesome.

JS: That's very cool. Which projects are you most proud of?

JB: For sure the education outreach. It's hard putting yourself out there in such a way and not really knowing what to expect in the process. I don't have an education in educating students so for me that was a really big leap in just putting myself out there and offering what I thought would be beneficial for the teachers and then having that response from them. You know, it's been received exceptionally well, and I'm very appreciative of every teacher that's let us into their classroom, so that's probably something I'm most proud of that I've done.

TO: Understandably so. It's been amazing watching you take the project from something purely (*indecipherable*) in people's minds to visiting hundreds of children a day, let alone how many you can accomplish visiting within a week. Something I think that's really important to add to this is that you've definitely made an impact to the extent that you've had children pop up in here with their parents and be like "oh this is the amazing place that Ms. Baker taught me about." And it's definitely like you can see the impact like coming to light because these kids are definitely taking it in and you're like "hey, I saw you here last year!" It's something you can see the benefit of what you're doing. But knowing that, obviously you've made an impact on others – are there any coworkers, managers, anybody else that have had some impact upon you?

JB: I think in general as a department we've always worked really close with each other. We've always had close relationships. Jen really took a chance on me when I got the internship because I was an older student, you know, I was working full time. I already had a child, so I was not the typical intern candidate and she really took a chance on me. And then she had a vision for what she wanted the Records Center to look like and she worked really hard to create a position that tailored to those visions that she had. And she's given me a lot of ability to do what I think works best under that vision if that makes sense. She knew she wanted outreach, she knew she wanted someone to get into the classroom, she wanted a social media presence, but she allowed me to take those ideas and really do with them what I thought worked best for the Records Center. In that situation she's given me a lot of ability to do some really amazing things for the Records Center.

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JB: Jana (*Jana Wells, former Records Center employee*), she was our microfilm supervisor. She has an impactful personality and has become one of my best friends. And then Tori Roberts – no, she started as Tori Roberts – I knew I would do that! Tori Otten, she's worked with me side-by-side on almost every single project I've done including school visits, social media, the inventory projects – we've worked

every single day together. So just in general, everyone at the records center has been amazing. Ted tries to keep things light and entertaining on a daily basis, so yeah, it's just been an amazing group of people to work with and we've been fortunate to have each other.

TO: Yes, hands down I agree there.

JS: What were some of your biggest challenges working at the Records Center?

JB: I mean it's in the basement! That's a challenge, making sure we're getting outside frequently. I like to joke that that's the think not great about it. But of course, you have to have a large open area to store the records in so that's always challenging. I mean some of the things I've done I had no experience doing, so just doing some of those things by myself has been challenging for me because it's not something I'm comfortable with, so that's also been a challenge. Just making sure people know who we are and what we do and how we can help them – that's always challenging as well. Those are probably some of the biggest things I've struggled with.

TO: Seeing as how they were challenges, it seems you've also learned a great many things. So after all the trials and tribulations, what has the Records Center taught you that you just weren't anticipating?

JB: Being in the public in general was not something I was comfortable with. Presenting to anyone was always a challenge for me. I have extreme stage fright. Thankfully I have little young students that have let me develop my public speaking skills and not judge me harshly in the process. It's just taught me that while an idea presented to you as something that is expected might be very scary such as going into the classroom and teaching young students; just being open to the idea of trying something new is completely ... It might be something you enjoy much more than you ever ... Like if I thought about teaching students, I would not have thought that would be something I would excel at or enjoy as much as I do. But, like I said, just taking something you might not be comfortable with and just trying it, you might learn a lot. So that's probably the biggest thing that I've learned – just putting yourself out there and trying new things.

TO: Well that concludes the portion of our questions pertaining to the Records Center in general, so the rest of these will be more as an overarching theme to working for the county as a whole. So what would you view as some of your highlights of your time with the county, maybe less focused on the Records Center?

JB: Well, I've learned a lot about Warren County. I don't live here, so just in general getting to know the other departments like working on the projects with the Facilities Department, you know, those types of things have been pretty awesome to be a part of.

JS: What has become or remains some of your favorite historical Warren County locations?

JB: The Silver Street Jail for sure is definitely my favorite. It just felt like a creepy old building to be in and not many people get to go through it, so we've been fortunate enough to go through the residence portion of it and the jail portion, so that's definitely my favorite historic building. Putting together this history of the court building itself – the Silver Street court building – was interesting because it's just been pieced together over the years so many times. So while we were creating that exhibit we really broke down each part of that building, so that one is probably my second-favorite.

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JS: What was the county like when you started versus when you left?

JB: Well like I said, not many people knew about our department when I first started. As a campus it had already started expanding, so the Administration Building held a lot more offices when I started. The Board of Elections had just been moved to a new building where the Prosecutor's Office and Emergency Services, so as a campus it had already started expanding. One of the biggest changes here (was when) they had already built a new jail, so they actually completely rerouted out whole road and then they built the new jail. So that's probably one of the biggest changes. Then in the basement when I first started, we were housed with our IT Department and GIS (Department) and there was also a server room down here. So they have since moved to the third floor, I think that's where Board of Elections was maybe, I don't know that for sure. So IT and GIS moved to the third floor so we've kind of expanded as a records center to their space. And our microfilm department was located in a teeny-tiny little room. So we have since expanded as the Records Center in general to other locations within the basement. So maybe we'll take over the whole thing at some point!

TO: We'll see what happens! So did any significant event happen within the county government, or in general during your time as an employee?

JB: So the Covid pandemic hit all of us in March of 2020, so that was weird for everyone I feel like. We never worked remotely before and in a matter of hours or a day, we were expected to work from home. Not expected, I'm sorry, we opted to work from home part of the time that we were quarantined for six or eight weeks total I think. So it changed the landscape of most things for us, but it's been great because we got a lot done during that time that we were putting on the backburner as far as projects and such. That was probably the most significant thing that has happened since I started.

TO: Well we spoke about how the Records Center itself taught you to take chances and just experience new things that might yield something amazing. Have you learned anything specifically from working with the county?

JB: Yeah. I came from the private sector and working for corporations. Just the pace of life is much different for the county. I feel like your appreciation for your coworkers and just in general – I want to say the vibe. But the office environment is nothing like I've ever experienced before. I don't know if that's because of the Records Center or if that's because of working for the county, but it seems like a better appreciation for my job and for my coworkers. I feel like I've enjoyed working here the most out of any job I've had so far.

TO: We're glad to hear it.

JS: So on that note, what will you miss most about working for the county?

JB: I think I'll miss the historic records for sure. I mean I'm definitely going to miss my coworkers – they've been pretty amazing! Going into the classroom I think I will miss that in the fall. Those are things I'll miss the most, but definitely my coworkers for sure.

TO: We'll miss you too, don't even think about it. So last question for you: What advice would you give to any current or future Warren County employees?

JB: Like I said, a lot of the things I've worked on as a deputy archivist are not things that I envision myself doing in my professional life, so just being open to the possibility of trying new things, you really can surprise yourself of what you're capable of doing because even though you might be terrified ahead of going into the classroom, or ahead of creating an entire permanent exhibit – it's going to turn out amazing. And don't be afraid to try new things.

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JB: Don't be afraid when someone asks you to do something that seems like it's completely out of your realm of possibility – you'll surprise yourself.

TO: Well on that note, that was our last official question, so is there anything else you would like to share about your time at the Warren County Records Center and Archives?

JB: I don't think so.

TO: Well on that note, I will thank you for your time today and I will conclude this interview.

[End transcription 00:40:28]