

Exit Interview with Ruby Bugg, Mail Analysis Section of the White House Correspondence Unit

Interviewer: Keith Corona, Office of Presidential Papers

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Transcriber: Lyn B. Kirkland

Corona: Good afternoon, Ruby. When did you first come to work here in the White House and what positions have you held?

Bugg: Well, I first started in 1952, I guess it was, under the Truman administration and I worked in mail analysis then too dealing with incoming mail.

Corona: Have you worked from Truman up to the present?

Bugg: No, what happened is, well, I got married.

Corona: Congratulations.

Bugg: and I was gone then until--my husband was in the military-- so we were transferred back to this area in '57, so then I came back to work in the pool section. This is a section where letters, for instance, were written to the President but required agencies, a referral of some sort, you know, need attention from

Corona: Like maybe the State Department

Bugg: Yes.

Corona: Might want to answer

Bugg: Or Secretary Coggins, an agricultural problem. We would refer it to an agency. I did that when I was here and worked for a year under Eisenhower and was gone again. Then I came back in '68 this time.

Corona: OK.

Bugg: And I have been here since then.

Corona: Did you have any previous job experiences that helped prepare you for your White House duties?

Bugg: Meeting the public basically, I suppose. OK, I had worked as a receptionist for two very popular doctors when we were stationed in Tampa. I have worked behind a bakery counter when I was in high school. I worked as a secretary in a plumbing and heating company. I've had various jobs over the years

Corona: Right, right. So I guess you could say one chief difference in your working here is that you are dealing with the public through the letters instead of face to face.

Bugg: Right.

Corona: What did you like most about your first days here, like under the Truman administration?

Bugg: I think the excitement of working for a President.

Corona: Right. .

Bugg: I had worked, by the way, I have worked so many jobs I forget. When I first came I worked for Internal Revenue for a while. I was detailed to Treasury, and from Treasury I was detailed here....from Treasury across the street. And they had given me a choice. The job, when I was detailed to Treasury, was completed so they had given me a choice of going back to Internal Revenue or going to the White House. And my golly, given the choice, I was coming here. So it was excitement. ...and I was only 18 at the time. So, it was quite a thrill.

Corona: Yeah. When you came back to work here in 1968 under the Nixon administration or then under the Johnson administration did you feel the same excitement? I am sure it was completely different, the atmosphere.

Bugg: It was. But the excitement still was there. It is a good feeling to work for the office.

Corona: Uh huh. Since you spent so much time working in mail analysis over various administrations, I would like to ask you a few questions in regards to that. Can you recall specific issues or situations during previous administrations that resulted in great volumes of mail? If you want, I will give you some examples. You want me to....

Bugg: I can remember during the Truman administration was the steel strike that caused a greater influx than usual of mail, but mail then was less, you know, less people writing then as now. Now we are getting much more, much more, of course. During the Johnson administration, remember when he held his dogs up by their ears?

Corona: Right.

Bugg: Now, that caused a letter flurry, because it bothered animal lovers, not realizing the dogs weren't harmed, of course. I remember that time.

Corona: I am sure during the war.

Bugg: Oh, my golly, yes. We got...during Vietnam, of course there were, oh, many times, like the bombing of Cambodia.

Corona: Right.

Bugg: I think that was during the Nixon Administration that that happened. A great influx of letters.

Corona: For example, during Johnson's years in the White House, when the war was still going on did most of the letters seem to be in favor of the way he was handling the situation or were most of them negative letters based on the fact that our troops were still, you know, being

Bugg: I think it varied at different times, different days, different months.

Corona: Right.

Bugg: Sometimes yes. Sometimes no. But I did feel that the public had a lot to do with his saying he wouldn't run

Corona: Really.

Bugg: As a result of the critical type mail that he was getting at that time.

Corona: What about the urban riots during the spring of 1968 under Johnson, you know, shortly after Martin Luther King Jr. was killed?

Bugg: Oh, that was a situation too. We got much from that. And Kent State came at that period of time. Yes, that was a great problem.

Corona: When Nixon was President, I am sure his trip to China generated a lot of mail.

Bugg: Mostly all approvals, by the way.

Corona: How about the situations with our prisoners of war in Vietnam?

Bugg: Oh, that we got a great deal of mail on....mainly, you know, get them out.

Corona: Right, yeah. The Watergate scandal, I know, had to have led to an interesting time.

Bugg: That was probably the biggest. And then the pardon of Nixon under the Ford administration.

Corona: Well, when Nixon resigned, too, I am sure a lot of mail came in too.

Bugg: Yes. There were times when we had tons of mail. It was sitting in the corridors down stairs it was so backlogged for a while.

Corona: Basically, you have answered this question already, but I will ask it again. Has the volume of mail changed significantly over the past several years?

Bugg: It really has. The staff has picked up a little, which has helped, but the mail has picked up more than the staff. [They chuckle.]

Corona: What would you say is the average number of letters per week? I am sure it is a difficult question because it varies from month to month.

Bugg: It is.

Corona: With the national environment....with what's going on. Does it have an effect?

Bugg: Yes, it varies according to the current issues, the current problems, the current situation. An average, I'd say, 20,000, halfheartedly. I don't know if I am near or not or it's anything around that right now.

Corona: You mentioned now there are many more people working in mail analysis. What is the current structure of that office in terms of supervisors, subordinates, and who are the chief people who work in mail analysis?

Bugg: OK. We have one main supervisor who is Milly Bell and she has an assistant, Mary Lou Maddox. Then there are like, I guess....we were broken out at one time in units, but now it is more or less just as a group, but various groups do various types of mail, let's say. Like there are two or three, depending upon the amount of the mail, who do nothing but children's mail. Then there is a group who do what we would call MI mail, the "more important". That would be types of letters from governors, senators, that type.

Corona: When you say children's mail, do you mean mail addressed to Amy or mail addressed to the?

Bugg: To the President.

Corona: From children?

Bugg: From children, yes. And children would be like under 16 is considered children.

Corona: Right. What different facets of mail analysis have you worked with? Have you worked with more important mail and children's mail?

Bugg: I haven't worked children's mail that much but I have worked it? I have worked here more recently with the more important type mail, but I have worked the ordinary letters from Mr.

and Mrs. America type. I have worked special delivery; registered. I guess I have worked just about every type mail.

Corona: Which type was most interesting to you to work with?

Bugg: Frankly, I think I would prefer just Mr. and Mrs. Public. The more important is interesting and it is easily read, and all that, but I prefer just the routine stuff, I think.

Corona: I have already asked you questions about specific types of mail that has come in under previous administrations related to specific issues, and now I guess I would like to ask you a few questions about the Carter administration. For example, I am sure he received a lot of mail in regards to the Panama Canal Treaty.

Bugg: Yes.

Corona: And Egypt, Israel treaty, I'm sure.

Bugg: Right. That was basically support. The Camp David Summit, you know, was mostly all support. It got very heavy interest, of course. OK, Panama Canal; a lot of anti-mail in that respect.

Corona: So, you also handled the foreign mail too.

Bugg: Yes.

Corona: I am sure a lot of Panamanians who would have been opposed to ...

Bugg: In that respect, though, if it were written in English, we would handle it. But if it were written in a foreign language, it's I think a State Department translation.

Corona: Uh huh. How about Andrew Young's resignation?

Bugg: Oh, it got quite a bit urging his resignation prior to [both laugh], but we got others supporting him.

Corona: Energy, I'm sure.

Bugg: Oh, a big one. That and economics.

Corona: And I am sure done by people who live in the far northeast part of the country who spend a lot...

Bugg: Do we spend our money for heat or for food, type thing. We've gotten those.

Corona: I know at one time President Carter used to get what they called a presidential sample of letters. Does he still receive that?

Bugg: Yes. I think it is weekly he gets it. I'm really not sure.

Corona: How many letters make up the sample?

Bugg: I think he gets about 20, at least.

Corona: Who decides which letters?

Bugg: I think each analyst and we have I think there are 16 or 20, I haven't counted recently. They give what they consider and then another office will read through and get a break down, you know, of what they think that he would want to see.

Corona: For example, if three analysts were chosen, each one of those three people would submit what they would regard, and then someone else would decide maybe one of those three letters to be...

Bugg: Yes, they could overlap, you know.

Corona: Did previous presidents also receive a presidential sample, do you know?

Bugg: I'm not sure, I'm really not.

Corona: I'd like to ask you a few questions about the special reply mail. Who makes the final determination on the type of response to be sent to an individual on President Carter's behalf? Is it Joyce Cork?

Bugg: Dan Chew, I think.

Corona: Dan Chew.

Bugg: Now, if it is a presidential, he would do it himself, I'm sure. But over Dan Chew's signature, I'm pretty sure it would be him.

Corona: How does Joyce Cork fit into special replies, then?

Bugg: I think just drafting it up and then it is worked over until you get it down to the exact wording that you want.

Corona: Have you noticed any differences in the types of mail addressed to the President as opposed to Mrs. Carter?

Bugg: I would say yes. I haven't read too much of Mrs. Carter's, because, again, her section is apart from the President's, but I have read some of hers and she would, uh... just the ones I have read, .she gets the type like, OK, her interest in mental health. She gets letters dealing with that subject. There was controversy about her staff. She got complaints on that, I do know.

Corona: Right. You mean the size of her staff?

Bugg: And the salaries that were given—when it was publicized.

Corona: During the recent Newsweek magazine article about her staff and her position in the White House?

Bugg: Uh huh.

Corona: Who's in charge of her correspondence, then?

Bugg: Rhonda Bush.

Corona: OK. So, that is a separate mail analysis office in a way, then, from the one that you work for?

Bugg: Right.

Corona: I know that in previous administrations a blue card case file was developed to handle certain letters. Is that still being maintained?

Bugg: No, not like it was. A blue card case was a prolific writer. I know of a writer who is still writing who was writing umpteen years ago. He was a teenager at the time and his subject matter---the reason he wrote each time was for pictures, autographs, copies of speeches, anything. He just wanted something. So we-----a system was set up where especially in one administration you can't just copy pictures, you know, and it carried over but it has been done away with to a great extent. We have picked it up again. You know, if you get three or four letters from the same writer in one day, you know, you start wondering about it, you know, and that has happened, of course.

Corona: Really. Wow.

Bugg: Yeah.

Corona: This guy that you mentioned, how far back does he go? Does he go back to...?

Bugg: Johnson, I would say. Possibly prior to that but I don't remember prior to that.

Corona: I always thought of blue card case being someone who, the subject matter of the letters would be a bit strange.

Bugg: Well, it could be that too, but basically prolific writers.

Corona: What other White House staff units work closely with the mail analysis section such as the comment office?

Bugg: Central files because often, you know, a writer will write and refer to another letter that he has written a couple of weeks ago or something; maybe in a complaint against not receiving a

reply, but he doesn't give you enough information to know what to do with it or what has happened to the first letter, so we work closely with Central Files on that.

Corona: What about the Press Office?

Bugg: For press releases, yeah.

Corona: OK. Your specific duties in regards to mail analysis would be then to, you read the letter, then what do you do?

Bugg: Underline, highlight, usually underlining the main subject. You know, if it were a problem, for instance, a personal problem, pinpoint the fact that he needs help in receiving social security, that sort of thing. In that case, we would, if it were the social security problem, send it to HEW, SSA[Social Security Administration] and that then, it's picked up from our office and taken then to, that would go to referral, which is the unit that I used to work in, remember. And from there they are sent in bulk, as I understand.

Corona: You don't do the actual draft for the responses directly for children's mail when a child writes, you know, "Dear President Carter I think you are doing a very, very good job." You know, they aren't asking for anything, would you respond to that?

Bugg: Yes.

Corona: Would you do the draft yourself?

Bugg: No, we don't. We have, I think there is probably three hundred form type replies. I hate using that word "form type" because actually they're robo-typed but they are personalized also, you know, but there is one like you mentioned, a letter of support. There is views-and-suggestions type.

Corona: Some form responses also are in the form of cards, aren't there?

Bugg: We have done away with those. Yeah, we did have them at the first part of the administration, but no.

Corona: Don't they still use them with Amy?

Bugg: I think they do with Amy, yeah, but not with the President.

Corona: What percent of letters received by your office are referred to the secret service for security purposes?

Bugg: OK, they would receive, I am not sure of the percentage. It is not too great, I don't think. But, they would get anything that is a threat, an out and out threat, of course, or a veiled type threat. Anything that you think would endanger his life or the life of the family.

Corona: Does that type of mail change, in any way, in terms of the amount of it from administration to administration? I guess it might also depend on what is going on.

Bugg: It really does. It depends on the situation. The Vietnam era, that brought out a little hate mail.

Corona: Of course, right now, the most significant issue in the news is the Iranian crisis; the fact that Iranians are holding 50 or 40 Americans hostage. I am sure that has generated a lot of mail.

Bugg: It really has. That's the greatest portion that's coming now, on Iran.

Corona: And what type of letter to you see in regards to that?

Bugg: Do something, mainly, and then support of having patience for the efforts that are being made. But a lot of it is "do something, right or wrong," but do something. They don't think anything is being done, basically.

Corona: Most people are not writing in suggesting that the President send over troops or things like that?

Bugg: We are getting that too. Some hawkish types that is probably the wrong word, but, yes. In fact, World War II veterans are volunteering at times.

Corona: Really?

Bugg: Yes.

Corona: Have you worked with correspondence for first family gifts?

Bugg: No, not really. The only way that I would have any contact with that is someone writing in saying they were sending a gift or asking permission to send a gift. In a case of that sort what we would do would be alert room 45, which is gift receiving, that a gift is coming and then the gift unit would handle it from that point.

Corona: OK. Could you run past me what is your typical day in mail analysis?

Bugg: It's busy.

Corona: What I mean is when you come in is there a stack of mail on your desk that you have to go through?

Bugg: There are three, three or four of us that took turns at the viewing table over in the post office area. And what they do over there is pull out letters, envelopes that is, now this is unopened mail at this point; letterhead types, though, that have return addresses that are recognizable as being important, or what have you. OK. I was one of them that worked at the

reviewing table and you put them in groups of official or the more important. That's basically what they pull out up there. The ordinary type mail is pulled out from it. See what I am trying to say? This is the official, more important type to be reviewed.

Corona: Right. Right.

Bugg: And the flaps. The flaps being anything that is manila envelope type that is too large for a machine, because they do have a machine that automatically slits the envelopes open.

Corona: Right.

Bugg: OK. So we review the mail, the first thing. And there's ordinarily is mail left over from the day before because it is seldom that we are up to date exact. We try to be, but there is mail there in their unit so you can get started. They ordinarily have a quota of about 300 per day. Sometimes you can, sometimes you can't, depending upon the subject matter that's coming, of course, and the type of mail you are reading. And we have some telegrams too. I haven't mentioned that have I?

Corona: No.

Bugg: But you do read those also. From there it is picked up at our desk periodically and put in groups of things that are going to the correspondence section. Now that is Bob Anderson's section for the robo type replies.

Corona: Right.

Bugg: There is another slot on our desks for staff members, anything going to a staff member or Ann Thomas's section.

Corona: Do you have something that would be addressed to the staff person or does that mean the staff person would, you know, draft the letter?

Bugg: Draft the letter, because if it is addressed to a staff member, it would go directly to him.

Corona: OK. Ann Thomas, you mentioned her. What office does she supervise?

Bugg: She works in special replies. Also, any letter that an agency couldn't handle and we feel that none of our robo replies would fit the letter, we would send to her for a special reply type.

Corona: How long does it usually take for your office to answer a given letter from the general public and what are the determining factors?

Bugg: OK, the state house reply, you know, going to the correspondence section, it should be answered---I don't think there is a given time. Again, it would depend upon the bulk of mail that they have.

Corona: It would also depend upon what the person is writing about, too, wouldn't it? For example, if it was a social security problem it could take a long time, of course, because it would have to get to the social security people.

Bugg: That's right.

Corona: And they would have to check into the specific problem.

Bugg: It would leave this office, yeah, they would have to do it, and quite possibly it would go from Washington's Social Security to Baltimore, then maybe over to their own local area.

Corona: For instance, a general letter of support. How long do you think that could take?

Bugg: I would say within a couple of days because it leaves our office and then on down there and they can get it out in no time. But again, depending upon any backlog they have.

Corona: True.

Bugg: Because they get backlogged just like we did down here.

Corona: Right. Christmas cards. This is the Christmas season. Is that something that your office deals with directly?

Bugg: The MI, the more Important type Christmas cards going to the President, President and Mrs., we send in just an inter-office envelope to Rhonda Bush for the social office to answer.

Corona: Right.

Bugg: The ones from the general public, they are usually just filed.

Corona: Right. In central files?

Bugg: Uh huh.

Corona: OK. I know you worked here for many years and this might be sort of a difficult question but what have been your most significant assignments and projects in the past eleven years that you have been here and also dating back to your days in the Truman administration?

Bugg: That is difficult, but during a period of time when we were just being flooded with mail we also will get detailed personnel from agencies.

Corona: Right.

Bugg: During the, uh, a couple of times, once was during the Cambodian bombing and the other, I think, was during the Kent State bit, that we had detailed personnel and basically we were all down on the ground floor.

Corona: Right.

Bugg: But offices were opened up on the fourth floor and two of us, and I was one of them, was in charge of, I have forgotten the amount, but it must have been 16 or 20 from various agencies who came over to help us to get up to date on it. And that was quite a project that lasted for a while.

Corona: Which projects gave you the most personal satisfaction?

Bugg: One specific one?

Corona: Or a few.

Bugg: I really can't think of any one specific one. It is just overall that is good.

Corona: Right. Did you get to meet Presidents Johnson, Nixon and Ford?

Bugg: Yes, I did.

Corona: What memories do you have about those occasions?

Bugg: There was a big difference between them, I think. All of them very nice, congenial. I thoroughly enjoyed working with all of them.

Corona: What were the second favorites? I don't know what you meant.

Bugg: They came to our office. And then we were invited over there at various times too for various occasions.

Corona: Right. Did you get to meet President Truman or Eisenhower?

Bugg: Oh, Truman, in particular, he wandered in our office. He just wandered through. Things were different then.

Corona: Right.

Bugg: Security wasn't as great.

Corona: Right, right.

Bugg: He would just wander. He was just one of the people.

Corona: Right, right.

Bugg: He was one of my favorites too.

Corona: What about President Eisenhower?

Bugg: Eisenhower. I met him at a Christmas party and that was it because I wasn't here but about a year under him.

Corona: Right, right. Did you have occasions to meet other members of first families over the years too?

Bugg: Yes.

Corona: Prior to this administration?

Bugg: Wives and children, yes.

Corona: When did you meet Jimmy Carter?

Bugg: I don't think I have met him personally, you know, like on a handshake basis, but I have been over to the White House Christmas party, meetings in the East Room, that sort of thing.

Corona: Right. Were you involved in the presidential campaign of 1976?

Bugg: No.

Corona: What disposition has been arranged for the official files that you have created as a member of the White House staff?

Bugg: The Central Files.

Corona: I have sort of touched on this before but what were your most interesting or exciting experiences working here, like the Christmas parties? What events really stand out as having been unique?

Bugg: They were nice. The Christmas parties always have been, of course. I think meeting Mrs. Truman. She was, you know, she didn't --- she wasn't in the spotlight—only very, very little, and she is a very gracious person. I was very young and impressionable, too, of course, but it really made an impression upon me.

Corona: This basically concludes the interview now. Just for the record we'd like to ask if you would you leave a forwarding address and phone number?

Bugg: 6611 Lawndale Dr., Falls Church. My phone number is 534-1210.

Corona: Zip code?

Bugg: 32012

Corona: Thank you very much.

Bugg: Oh, you're welcome.