

JIMMY CARTER LIBRARY
ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

DATE: April 20, 2004
SPEAKERS: INTERVIEWEE - Martin I. Elzy
INTERVIEWER - Albert Nason
LOCATION: Atlanta, Georgia

[Tape 1, Side A.]

ALBERT NASON: This is Albert Nason, oral history archivist at the Jimmy Carter Library in Atlanta. Today I am interviewing Martin I. Elzy, former assistant director at the Carter Library. The interview is being held at the Carter Library. Today is April the 20th, 2004.

Martin, I'd like to start with just some of your professional and personal background. You're from Illinois.

MARTIN ELZY: That's right. I grew up in Sullivan, Illinois, then went to Charleston, Illinois, to Eastern Illinois University. Got a Bachelor of Science in Education degree. Thought I was going to be a high school teacher.

NASON: I thought your degree was in history.

ELZY: Well, it was a major in history. And then I got a Master of Arts in history at Eastern Illinois, and then I went to Miami University in Ohio and got a PhD in American history.

NASON: At that time, what was your interest? Was it particularly presidential or twentieth century?

ELZY: I was always interested in recent history, and so, for example, I wrote my dissertation using research material from the [Harry S.] Truman Library, and that's how I got interested in even working in presidential libraries. I asked them how you got a fine job like that. Then, as I was working on my dissertation, I did teach one year of high school in Franklin, Ohio, before I was hired by the National Archives.

NASON: What year was this?

ELZY: I taught the year '72-'73. I was hired in the summer of '73 by the National Archives. I went to work in the Office of Presidential Libraries, and—

NASON: In D.C.?

ELZY: Yes, in the summer of '73 to the summer of '74, and in that year they had a training program, and you worked in different offices, so I worked for a couple of weeks in the Office of Presidential Libraries; I worked in the NARA [National Archives & Records Administration] Budget Office; I worked in *Prologue*, the magazine of the National Archives; I spent three months working in the Library of Congress Manuscript Division. All this was a training program to prepare us to go to libraries. And then in the summer of '74, I went to the Lyndon Baines Johnson Library in Austin, Texas.

NASON: And how long were you there?

ELZY: I was there until January of 1981, when President Carter left office. And so I arrived in Atlanta to begin work on the Carter Library on January 19, 1981, the day before President Carter left office.

NASON: Was this when the offices were still down near the Russell Building?

ELZY: Yes. I had been out here in December, as I recall, for a couple of weeks, and had just seen what was then called the annex to the Russell Building, the Martin Luther King

Jr. Annex. It had been an old post office, and the Postal Service was not quite out of the building, but they were on their way out, and so the whole building was going to be renovated. Well, that made a big second floor, which was entirely open, which was ideal for our storage purposes. It wasn't broken up into small rooms. That became, on the second floor, where we stored all the material, and then we did have a few offices.

NASON: When the Carter Library got off and running, were you involved in any of the planning, or was that mainly the architect and Carter's decisions?

ELZY: All right. Once we got to Atlanta, of course, it was clear they were going to build a permanent library and museum. I was not involved a lot in the planning of that, but some. For example, he [President Carter] had people in his office who were trying to figure out where the presidential library should be, so I went to presentations, with the President of Emory University, James [T.] Laney, and also went down with people from President Carter's staff to Macon, to Mercer University, which also had an interest in having the library. And there were other locations that were interested.

NASON: I've heard that there was even an idea by Carter to have it down in Plains [Georgia], but he was talked out of that.

ELZY: I'm sure people in Plains would have liked to have had it. It would have been another tourist attraction and it would have been a fine addition to the community.

NASON: Rather inconvenient for the scholar.

ELZY: Well, I think the National Archives and eventually President Carter felt that—although I never talked to him about it—but that in Atlanta you would have a much higher visitor load in the museum and also would be much more convenient for scholars.

NASON: Right. Have you written any articles about Carter or about the library as such?

ELZY: I have, and as far as I know, they are in the vertical file here at the library, under my name. They're mostly articles about what we had for research on various topics, trying to encourage people to do research.

NASON: What professional ties or memberships have you become involved with as a result of the Carter Library?

ELZY: Here, I was a member of the Society of Georgia Archivists and also the Georgia Association of Historians, at the state level. In different years, I served as president of both of those organizations, and I was on other committees. It was really an important part of being in the Georgia community and trying to get publicity—public relations, rather, and publicity, I suppose—with the historians in the state and with the archivists. I also attended a couple of the state political science meetings, and I thought that was important, and I spoke there about what we had available that political scientists might want to use. I also was one of the directors of the Georgia Archives Institute for about fifteen years that the Carter Library was a co-sponsor and host of the Institute. That was an important link for the Library with the archival community in Georgia.

NASON: Speaking of your role as a member of the presidential libraries rather than just of the Carter Library, did you have annual meetings with the other assistant directors or was there much meeting in Washington to discuss policy?

ELZY: As you well know, Bert, but in case our people reading this transcript don't, the National Archives has an Office of Presidential Libraries, and each of the presidential libraries in the system report to that Office of Presidential Libraries. Periodically there are training sessions; periodically there are meetings. For example, when this library was dedicated, the directors of all the presidential libraries came to Atlanta and had a meeting

in conjunction with the dedication of the library. One of my responsibilities at the dedication was to herd the directors around, and these directors, of course, all have their own ideas about things, so that was quite an experience, but I enjoyed it, and it was good to meet all the other directors. And presidential libraries can share a lot of information back and forth to help each other out, because often we have the same problems. It works pretty well.

NASON: I know that President Carter wanted his library to be more than just a museum; he wanted to have a study center here, and when President [George H. W.] Bush, the first President Bush was thinking about setting up his library, he traveled throughout the system and visited several of the libraries, including the Carter Library. I just wondered, did Carter do any traveling like that that you know of?

ELZY: I don't know, actually, whether President Carter went to the other libraries with that in mind or not. He certainly has been to some of the other libraries to receive awards and such. But I don't recall whether he or Mrs. Carter traveled to them to get ideas about setting up their [library]. Now, if one wants to know his view of setting up the presidential library, the best source is the book that he and Mrs. Carter wrote together, because he writes in there about—

NASON: Is this *Everything to Gain*?

ELZY: Yes. He writes in there about thinking about waking up in the middle of the night and figuring out what he wanted this to be and so forth.

NASON: Did you have any particular dealings with Carter on library issues?

ELZY: As assistant director, I did not deal with him a lot. That was the director's role. I remember the first time I met him, though, was in February of '81, so about a month

after he got out of office. He and Mrs. Carter and an entourage at that time—because the General Services Administration was new to providing services to this former president, and so they wanted to be as helpful as they could. They came over from his offices at the Russell Building to our office across the street at the King Annex, and at that time there were just three of us on the staff, Dave Alsobrook, Roslyn Wright and myself. And so we showed them our facility there. The material was still sitting on pallets, in rows, as they'd come off the trucks.

NASON: Did that include the artifactual material as well as the textual?

ELZY: Yes, there were big museum crates stacked in there as well, so that was the first time I met him. Shortly after, he and Mrs. Carter hosted a homecoming celebration, I guess you'd say, for themselves in Plains, which was really for the local community, but they did invite the people who were working in their office in Atlanta and in the library office to come down. And so my wife Mary and son Joshua, who was only about two years old, and I drove down there. Of course, it's about a three-hour ride. Our two favorite stories from that are that as we got out of the car and we walked toward the home and we were actually going to the former President's home, a couple of months after he leaves office, and our two-year-old son, who's been in the car for three hours, starts running across the lawn, and Secret Service men start chasing him because apparently he was setting off the sensors in the lawn. And then, being from Texas, President Carter's staff knew that Josh could do the Hook'em Horns sign of the University of Texas Longhorns, so they had Josh do that for President Carter, and I'm not sure President Carter knew what it meant. [Laughter.]

NASON: I know several times in the years that the library has been open that there have been special investigations down here. Like, there was one about JFK materials, which is almost immaterial for the Carter Library, but there was also one about Gary Sick's book and Barbara Honegger's book, both named *October Surprise*. Could you tell us something about the investigation they had down here for that?

ELZY: I had worked with security classified material for all my career, and it is true, as you say, that occasionally there will be investigations that are going on that will cause the current government – either Congress or the Executive Branch -- to send representatives down to a presidential library to do research that will help them in resolving whatever questions the current government has. And certainly the *October Surprise* was one of those instances. There were others. There were human rights violations in Latin America, and Congress or the Executive Branch wanted to find out what had been going on in the Carter White House about those, see what evidence the Carter White House had. And those continued for, I don't know, I suppose twenty years after the fact that you can have those investigations, and then they get to the point where they figure your material is too old to much matter to them, but that does happen.

But I don't remember much about the details on any one of those. Our responsibility is -- we're informed of what the investigators are interested in seeing. We have to then find it, see if we have any material on that topic, and we have to make sure that the people who are coming down to look at it have the appropriate clearances to see the material. Sometimes they'll send people who don't have high enough clearances to see material, which is not good, of course, and so we can't give them access. We might have to sort the material, so that maybe one member of their team can look at all of it but

others can only look at part. For every presidential library, and every presidential library does that, it's a difficult, time-consuming procedure, but, of course, you do need to do it to support the current government's investigations.

NASON: Allow me this. This might sound a little trivial, but it's always had a lot of interest for a certain class of people who follow Carter's career. In 1997 President Clinton had a general investigation about the Roswell [New Mexico] UFO. Was there any kind of a follow-up to that here? People always seem to connect Jimmy Carter with UFOs because of his one-time sighting of something.

ELZY: Every library gets investigations about unidentified flying objects from time to time. President Carter had, earlier in his career, before he was President, turned in an official report of having sighted something. That ended up in one of the tabloids, I think, when he was running for President or when he was President, and that drew attention to the fact that he turned in this report. Of course, since he was trained as a scientist, why, people felt that he would have great credibility on this issue. I think, as I recall, the scientists had studied it and decided it was a planet or something like that.

NASON: Yes. It would have nothing to do with Roswell in 1947.

ELZY: Correct.

NASON: One of the big changes in the archives, both national libraries in general and the Carter Library, was the passage of the Presidential Records Act in 1978, right in the middle of Carter's administration. This didn't apply to him, but I just wondered, [the Office of] Presidential Libraries in D.C. has been trying to standardize the way materials are treated in all the different presidential libraries, and I just wonder if there are any

stories you can tell about that. Carter, himself, promised to follow the provisions of the PRA as much as he could, so I just wondered if there's any conflict there.

ELZY: You're right. The Presidential Records Act being passed in the midst of his administration—if President Carter had been reelected, it would have created a tremendous problem because his first term—the rules we would have followed would have been under his deed of gift, and the second term it would have been under the Presidential Records Act. The libraries that follow the Carter Library are under the Presidential Records Act. I've not worked in one of those. My impression is it's very difficult to deal with. I'm glad that my experience was at the Johnson and Carter libraries, where we were dealing with the Presidents' deed of gift. Processing entire collections, I think that we serve researchers better than just waiting for researchers to come in, make requests and then trying to find individual documents. To me, it seems that the Presidential Records Act is sort of like if you had a public library that didn't buy any books until a member of the public came in and said, "I want this book." Well, you wouldn't end up with a coherent collection, and you wouldn't be serving subsequent readers who came into your library, and I fear that the Presidential Records Act may have that same effect.

NASON: With the presidential libraries, there has always been a lot of cross-fertilization as far as personnel is concerned. Our chief archivist now came from the [President Dwight D.] Eisenhower Library, and Dave Alsobrook, who was our first chief archivist here, went on to the [George H.W.] Bush Library and is now at the Clinton Library. And you, yourself, started off at the LBJ Library. I remember once that you made a very

insightful observation about the difference between LBJ and President Carter as far as the way the public perceived them and the way they really were.

ELZY: Perhaps what you're thinking of is—

NASON: You were at the Organization of American Historians.

ELZY: I remember that—if you look at the papers of LBJ and you look at the papers of Jimmy Carter, one thing that certainly struck me was that it was hard to find that LBJ had written anything. LBJ had been in Washington for thirty years. He knew everyone up there when he became President, and he spent his time on the telephone and meeting people in person. He read documents, but at the bottom, his staff put: “Yes, No or See Me,” and he checked. It was hard to—you seldom found long stretches that Lyndon Johnson had written. If you found a couple of sentences that he'd written, you would bring it to the attention of your colleagues.

NASON: I think also he wrote two books, but they were heavily ghosted—

ELZY: Right, *Vantage Point*. He had a committee to help him write his memoir of the presidency, right. And many people lament that his personality is not in that book. But Jimmy Carter, on the other hand, had not worked in Washington before, and so he tended to deal with paperwork, and so in the Carter papers you find all sorts of annotations; you find handwritten notes to cabinet members, to the general public; and it is easier, I think, to understand what President Carter was thinking, why he was doing things, than with Lyndon Johnson.

Now, some people would say, Well, Lyndon Johnson was devious, and he was just trying to avoid being on the record. I don't think that's true. I think it's just it wasn't his style to write as much as Jimmy Carter did. Jimmy Carter, as I said, liked to deal with

the paperwork. Lyndon Johnson's staff tended to send him one-page memos. Jimmy Carter often got twenty-five-page reports on a particular issue, with all sorts of decisions to be made. So President Carter was more comfortable with all that paperwork, dealt less face to face with the people in Washington. Probably less time on the phone. Some would say this is due to Lyndon Johnson's long career in Congress, that he felt those face-to-face meetings were important, and Jimmy Carter didn't know these people personally, and so he did not do that.

NASON: I know one thing that researchers occasionally come here looking for, in the record, is what influence Carter's Baptist views might have had on his human policies, since that's not something that the President sits around his cabinet table philosophizing about. Once we had Betty Glad down here, and she is one of the foremost biographers of Carter, and she was musing to us that she always wondered how Carter could claim a connection between the Baptist church and civil rights and human rights, when the church that Carter had attended (before joining his present Maranatha Church) at one time was excluding blacks. We concluded that perhaps Carter was talking about Roger Williams, the apostle to the Indians in the original Northern Baptist Church. And one of the biographies that has come out about Carter is called *The Yankee from Georgia*, telling how atypical for this region he was. Since you, yourself, are from outside the South and have been associated with the Northern Baptist Church, have you anything to say along those lines about the difference between the Southern Baptists and the Northern Baptists?

ELZY: Actually, I was raised as a child in the American Baptist Church. Then when I went to college in Illinois, I went to a Southern Baptist Church. It's interesting to see how President Carter represents, I think, what the Southern Baptist Church in the North

represented back in the sixties. It was very open, tolerant, a belief that, well, we all sin and we just need to work through it, help each other and get over it. But I think the Southern Baptist Convention maybe got a little less tolerant.

NASON: It's certainly become a lot more hierarchical in the last thirty years.

ELZY: Yes. And traditionally, of course, the Baptists hold that decisions are made in the local church. They hire their own minister; they decide when to fire him; there's no one who appoints him there. But President Carter—as with any institution, the Southern Baptist Convention had a wide range of views through these forty years, and President Carter certainly represents one aspect of it, and I personally think the superior aspect of it. His willingness to deal with people of all faiths, his understanding of their beliefs, his effort to understand and his tolerance, and, of course, on the racial issue in the South, I think Jimmy Carter represents the best of white response to that racial issue, particularly among politicians.

NASON: One of the reasons, I think, that the two branches of the Baptist church split was, around 1850, over the slavery issue.

ELZY: Right, right.

NASON: The Baptists were foremost among the abolitionists at that time.

ELZY: And you may know more about the history of all that than I've ever studied, but I think that President Carter has—

NASON: Drawn on that tradition —

ELZY: Yes, and you cannot deny how important his religious background has been to his beliefs, his views on topics.

NASON: I think we've covered most of the main details of your career here, and I just wondered what are your plans now? I know you're working as a consultant to the Carter Library, which we're very glad to have.

ELZY: Well, my wife Mary and I are retired to Austin, Texas, and we're both doing a lot of volunteer things in that community. I do want to stay involved in history, so I've been pleased to attend many events at the Johnson Library since we've been in Austin, and I have been doing some interviews for the Carter Library. We're enjoying doing that. If you don't mind, I'd like to run through some notes, just to be sure we have some things down on the record. In the office, when I first came here back in 1981, our contacts in the National Archives were James O'Neill and John Fawcett. And we met Tom Hudson, who was a local National Archives employee, and he did a great deal to get our temporary facility ready for us.

NASON: Was he at the facility at East Point?

ELZY: That is correct, but he supervised getting us shelving and getting the building ready and all that, and he was a great help.

When I came on January 19th in 1981, I met Roslyn Wright, who was coming down from the Office of Presidential Libraries in Washington to work here. She later left and unfortunately passed away a number of years ago. And then Bill Stewart, who at that time was at the [Gerald R.] Ford Library—and he came down and helped us get started. He was the most experienced of us, and he helped to get us started.

On January 20 then, we went back to our hotel rooms and watched the inauguration of Ronald Reagan, and on January 21st, we started unloading trucks. This is 1981. And I think we unloaded nineteen tractor trailer trucks, though we all disagree

now on how many there were. We unloaded them in two days, I remember that. And David Alsobrook came down on those trucks and became a member of the staff. So Roslyn, Dave and I were the original three.

I remember for a long time we didn't have any furniture. We just sat on the floor. But we were really too busy trying to figure out what we had. A big difference between Lyndon Johnson and Jimmy Carter: Lyndon Johnson announced he was not running for office on March 31st, 1968, but he didn't leave office until January of '69, so they had ten months to get ready to move. Jimmy Carter lost the election in November and had to be out in January, two months, and that makes a lot of difference. If you think of moving your home, how you would do it if you had ten months to do it and how you would do it if you had two months to do it, and remember, they were moving nineteen tractor trailer trucks. So things were not as well organized as we might have liked down here [laughs], but we got along. We got along.

GSA [General Services Administration] was running our building. I remember we told them that absolutely we couldn't stand fire, we couldn't stand water. We never did have a fire. We did have a leak, however, in one of our storage areas, where we had some of the museum items, but fortunately they were in big wooden crates, and so as far as I know, there was no damage done there.

Other problems with starting a new office like that: We had a terrible time just getting anyone to pick up the trash, and so for weeks we would load up our plastic bags with trash at the end of the day and take them down and put them in the trash receptacles on the street [laughs] because we couldn't get GSA to come clean up.

That next summer, I believe it was, of '81, Bob [Robert D.] Bohanan joined us from the [Franklin D.] Roosevelt Library, and then—excuse me, I said that wrong: Bob Bohanan from the Eisenhower Library. And then Don [Donald B.] Schewe [pronounced SHAVE-ee] was brought in as project director—again, more experienced than the rest of us—from the Roosevelt Library. And then, Jim [James A.] Yancey and Chuck Stokely came in the fall of '81, and Kathy Gillespie shortly thereafter.

I would say one big mistake that was made in staffing was we didn't get a museum curator until much later and that was Jim [James R.] Kratsas, and so we did not—

NASON: Process the artifacts?

ELZY: Yes, exactly. Jim was a great addition, but I wish he had joined the staff much sooner. We did not do as much as we might have early on with the artifacts, and that was difficult, then, when President Carter hired a firm to do the museum, because they wanted to know what they had to display, and we didn't have the information we should have had on our museum objects.

At the Carter office over in the Russell Building, the main people were Phil [Philip J.] Wise [Jr.], who still works for President Carter; Nancy Konigsmark, who still works for President Carter; Bernstine Wright, now Hollis, Bernstine Hollis, who works over there and is still at the Carter Center; and a couple of others at the Russell Building were Bob [Robert H.] Dunn and Dan [Daniel W.] Lee.

Don Schewe, the director of the project, dealt most with getting the building done, and there are two great things I think Don Schewe did as director that I would want to highlight, and that is getting us into a permanent building and also his interest in

computers. He was much more interested in introducing computers than certainly I ever was, and we were often ahead of the National Archives in that regard. And so Don, I think, left those two great things that he had done: getting into the building and the use of computers.

NASON: We intend to interview Don later.

ELZY: Good, good, good.

On October 2nd, 1984, we had the groundbreaking for this permanent facility, and almost exactly two years later, on October 1st of 1986, President Carter's birthday, we had the dedication. As often happens when you move into a new building, it wasn't quite ready, but we made the best of it. And then we opened the museum the next day, and indeed on October 1st, people who were invited to the dedication could see it. We opened the museum right away, and then in January of 1987, we opened the Research Room.

You talked earlier about people coming from other libraries to work, and that is true. We had Bob from the Eisenhower, Don from the Roosevelt, I had come from the Johnson, but then when we got ready to open the Research Room in January of '87, I was in charge, at that point, of reference, and so I was in charge of that Research Room. And I realized, as we opened it, that the people we had working in our Research Room—we always have a member of our staff in there—had never worked in a research room before [laughs], so there was a lot of training that had to go on, and the people took to it very well. We never had any big problems. It was very smooth. I think that researchers would have thought that everyone who worked in there was very experienced, so even though you do bring in people from other libraries, you do have to train people locally as well.

Somewhere in all that, I was named the assistant director, and I must say, I avoided administration as much as possible. I was more interested in—I was in charge of reference, and our security classified material, and our Research Room. At that time, Dave Alsobrook was in charge of processing. Our staff members would do a little of both. They'd work for both of us. Dave left about 1991 to go to the Executive Office Building next to the White House to start preparing for the George Bush Library, the first President Bush. And at that point, I ran reference and processing, so the whole archives, until Bob Bohanan, who had been on our staff originally, had left to go to Washington, came back as supervisory archivist in 1995. And at that point, he took over reference, and I took over processing, until Don Schewe left, retired in the fall of '99, and at that point, Bob took over all archival activities, and I was acting director for nine months.

Jay [E.] Hakes came as our director in June of 2000, and Jay was very interested and concerned about the museum. Not to suggest there was anything wrong with the museum, but he brought an emphasis on the attendance in the museum. Also he has raised money for exhibits for the museum, and worked on having better relations, I would say, with the Carter Center, improving those relations.

NASON: Right. One thing he wanted to do, I know, was to have some sort of foundation, similar to the other libraries, for scholarship research.

ELZY: And so I wanted to acknowledge the good leadership the Carter Library has received from both Don Schewe and Jay Hakes. They've emphasized things a little differently, and they've emphasized what needed to be done at their particular point in the evolution of the library. All the presidential libraries have kind of a similar life cycle, and we're now at the Carter Library—President Carter has been out of office almost

twenty-five years, and so we're at that point in the life cycle of a presidential library, and I think—I've been proud of the work that we've done here. And staff members like you, Bert, and all the others have done a great job.

NASON: Well, Martin, we'd like to thank you, too. You've certainly put your impress on this institution. There were many practices that I was trained in, and I was surprised sometimes when I went to other libraries and to Washington to find out that they weren't standard practices everywhere, that there were things that you and Alsobrook had created and dreamed up here. Of course, all this is changing with the change in life cycle. It's much more into computers these days. But I think our basic setup here has generally got the impress of Martin Elzy here, and we do appreciate all your work for it, and we hope to consult with you a lot in the future, and we wish you good luck in your retirement.

ELZY: Thank you, Bert.

[End of interview.]

TRANSCRIBED BY: Mim Eisenberg/WordCraft; December 2004