ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW WITH

THEORA McVAY ASHLAND, NEBRASKA FEBRUARY 26, 2020

INTERVIEWED BY DEBORAH HARVEY

AUDIO FILE #BRVB022620 – THEORA MCVAY

# EDITORIAL NOTE

This document is a rendering of the oral history interview as transcribed by the interviewer from the audio recording. Although effort was made to provide a verbatim transcription, for easier reading of the transcript, verbal pauses, repetitions of words, and encouraging words from the interviewer were omitted. The resulting oral history interview transcript was provided to the informant for review and, if necessary, correction. Ms. McVay made few modifications to the draft transcript. For the original interview, please refer to the audio file.

# ABSTRACT

Ms. Theora McVay traces the course of her career with the National Park Service beginning in 1975. She explains how cooperative agreements work and what she did as administrator of the Midwest Regional Office’s cooperative agreement with the Brown Foundation for their work for the Brown v. Board of Education National Historic Site. Ms. McVay describes her interactions with the Department of Justice during the investigation of the financial intersection of the Brown Foundation with the National Park Service through the cooperative agreement. She also discusses administering the construction contract for rehabilitation of Monroe Elementary School and some of the issues involved with that.

# PERSONS MENTIONED

Cheryl Brown Henderson, Treva Sykes, Tanya Bradley, Mr. Chavez, Marty Sterkel, Bess Sherman, Steve Adams, David Smith.



Theora McVay, 2020

# ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW WITH

**THEORA McVAY**

Interviewer: This oral history interview is for the Administrative History of the Brown v Board of Education National Historic Site in Topeka, Kansas. The interviewer is Deborah Harvey, with Outside The Box, on behalf of the Midwest Regional Office of the National Park Service. Interviewed today is Theora McVay – tell me if I don’t get this right – former Agreements Officer for the Midwest Regional Office. Okay. The date is February 26, 2020. This interview takes place at the Ashland Public Library in Ashland, Nebraska.

Ms. McVay, as I’m sure you know, the purpose of an Administrative History is to document the development of a unit of the National Park System, both physically and administratively. Oral histories are one way to get information that might not otherwise be available from documentary evidence. We try to get as much information as we can from as many different perspectives as possible in order to craft a robust narrative of the developmental history of the park. This document will be used by future park administrators to inform their decisions as they navigate future developments.

However, I should inform you that not all the information we gather will be included in the final Administrative History. That depends on how the information advances our understanding of park development. But I do want to say that we appreciate that you are giving your time to share your experiences of the development of the Brown v.

Board of Education site to further this project.

So, to start with, I’m going to have you repeat your full name and spell your first and last name for the transcriber.

McVay: Theora McVay. T-H-E-O-R-A M-C-V-A-Y,

Interviewer: Okay, thank you. See, that was the easy question. (Laughter) We start with the easy questions. The next easy question is, we are going to talk about your work with – for the National Park Service and then move on to the specifics of Brown v. Board. So, when did you start with the National Park Service?

McVay: I started – I had two terms of service with the Park Service. One, from about ’75, maybe – ’72, ’77 – something – ’78, something like that – I put five years in, in the mid-‘70s.

Came back to the Park Service in ’89. And I came back as a procurement tech, and then took a – took a position at – is this what you want?

Interviewer: Mmm-hmm.

McVay: – at the Midwest Regional Office because they needed an agreements – somebody to work with agreements, and I had been working with agreements. I was at the – I started at the Midwest Arc [Archeology] Center, in Lincoln, and then transferred up to the

Midwest Regional Office, Contracting. I was in the Contracting Division. I was a Contracting Officer, but I was doing agreements work.

Interviewer: Okay. So, in the ‘70s, you weren’t doing anything with Brown v. Board? McVay: Hmm-mmm. Oh, no.

Interviewer: You started doing something with Brown v. Board – McVay: File clerk.

Interviewer: (Laughs) Okay. So, what – when did you start getting involved with the Brown v. Board? McVay: When I went to the Regional Office in ’94.

Interviewer: ’94. Okay. So, you were the Regional Agreements Officer for the Midwest Regional Office, and you administered the cooperative agreements for Brown v. Board of Education, correct?

McVay: Yes.

Interviewer: So, please explain what is a cooperative agreement?

McVay: A cooperative agreement is a special kind of document. It’s not a contract. It’s an – a – an agreement that defines a relationship between two parties where there’s a – kind of a cross-benefit. That’s about – and it’s a legal document.

Interviewer: Okay. It’s a legal document, but it’s not a contract? McVay: It is not a contract.

Interviewer: Okay, so, it’s a legal agreement. Both parties sign it. They negotiate the terms, or you negotiate the terms?

McVay: They negotiate the terms.

Interviewer: They negotiate the terms, and so, your function in this agreement is to see that the terms are carried out?

McVay: Yes. Make payments, handle invoices, make sure all the paperwork is complete, and make sure the terms of the agreement are being fulfilled.

Interviewer: Okay. And what about if – once the – if the agreement expires, do you do anything about making sure it gets renegotiated?

McVay: Yes. We renew the agreements.

Interviewer: Okay, so, for Brown v. Board, during your tenure, what cooperative agreements did you administer?

McVay: I administered the agreement with the Brown Foundation. Interviewer: The Brown Foundation. Was that the only one they had?

McVay: Yes, if I’m thinking correctly.

Interviewer: Okay. Well, a lot of times, a park – for instance, Central High School in Little Rock has a lot of partners, so they have a lot of cooperative agreements.

McVay: The only one I think they might have – but I don’t recall ever doing one for them – was with Student Conservation Association, which supplied the kids – interns – volunteers to the parks. But I don’t even think they had one with them. The Brown Foundation was the only one that I can think of.

Interviewer: Was the only – okay, what were – can you tell me the details of this cooperative agreement, if you can recall them?

McVay: I’ll try to recall that. (Laughter) The terms of the agreement were that Brown Foundation would assist the Park Service in doing, you know, outreach, educational kinds of things, and that was about it. And that’s what I recall, okay?

Interviewer: Okay, so, by “outreach,” you mean into the community? McVay: Mmm-hmm. Into the community.

Interviewer: Okay. So, they promoted the park to the community, is that correct? McVay: That – yes.

Interviewer: Okay. And they did – they made educational materials for –? McVay: They may have made – done – made some educational materials. Interviewer: Okay. I was just talking to Deborah Dandridge, and she –

McVay: Deborah Dandridge?

Interviewer: She is the archivist at the Spencer Research Library at Kansas – University of Kansas. And she worked with Brown v. Board park through the Brown Foundation. And she was talking about that the Brown Foundation had produced brochures – well, not brochures – bulletins and things that were passed out to the schools – at the schools.

McVay: It seems like they did a Traveling Trunk. Interviewer: Yes. She said they did a traveling –

McVay: Okay, now that comes into my memory, but, honestly, I – you have to be patient with me, because I don’t – I’ve wiped these things off of my memory banks. And – okay, that’s my answer to that question.

Interviewer: Okay. Alright. And so, that – those two kinds of things fulfilled their requirements in their cooperative agreement, would you say? (Long pause) Or you’re not sure?

McVay: I’m not sure.

Interviewer: Okay. Alright. So, were there any unusual components to this cooperative agreement or to the administration of it?

McVay: As to the administration of it? (Pause) Not (pause) – relative to the way cooperative agreements were administered by my office, at that time, there was nothing unusual. It was administered as all cooperative agreements were administered, pretty much.

Interviewer: Okay. I’m going to turn this off for just a second. (Recording device turned off, then back on). Okay. So –

McVay: Let me say – I’ll say this: when I tell you that this agreement was administered relative to the same kind of parameters, protocol, as other agreements in the Park Service, that is the case. However, the relationship between the staff at the National Park Service office was – and the Brown Foundation – was problematic. It was bumpy.

Interviewer: From the beginning?

McVay: From the very beginning that I started administering this agreement because the Park Service was always – had some questions about what it was that the Foundation was doing for the Park Service and whether they should be actually funding that agreement to the – to the amount they were. What were they getting for that? And they were not always sure what they were getting for that.

Interviewer: Okay, so were they sure what they were supposed to get? McVay: I think they were – it was ambivalent, in some ways.

Interviewer: Okay. So, there was some vague –?

McVay: They were getting something, but it was a vague kind of thing.

Interviewer: Okay. So, the park was never comfortable that it was receiving its dollar value from the Brown Foundation for what it was paying for?

McVay: I think that that is – that’s reasonably accurate. They – I think there was – because the Brown Foundation was in – was involved in getting that park going, they kind of expected to be a continuing partner in it. And the park staff had some concerns about that being really necessary or true.

Interviewer: Okay. So, did – this happens a lot with parks. McVay: Believe me, I know that! (Chuckles)

Interviewer: (Chuckles) The motivating organization behind having the – a park established has a certain amount of feelings of ownership, and, when they turn it over to the federal government, to the National Park Service, for admin – management and administration, they have trouble letting go of that feeling of ownership. Is that what you think probably happened?

McVay: Yes. And I do understand what you’re saying, because I saw this on – in several different places, not just Brown. So, yeah, I do understand that. Yes, and I do think that’s what happened.

Interviewer: Okay. Did there – were there, like, written complaints, or was this just things people told you?

McVay: This was just conversations. No written complaints that I know of.

Interviewer: Just conversations with people? Okay. So, toward the – in 2010, was the Memorandum of Agreement still in operation?

McVay: The cooperative agreement? Interviewer: Cooperative agreement, I’m sorry. McVay: Was still in operation.

Interviewer: Okay. And, at that time, Cheryl Brown Henderson was hired as superintendent of the park?

McVay: She was selected as superintendent for the park, yes. Interviewer: Selected, yeah. She applied, and she was selected?

McVay: That’s correct

Interviewer: Do you happen to know why?

McVay: (Pause) Well, the – do you want to know what the – what rumors circulated? Interviewer: Sure.

McVay: There was a call from a Senator to the Regional Director – the Regional Director – Midwest Regional Director.

Interviewer: A Senator?

McVay: Yeah, a Senator called and urged him to hire Cheryl. Interviewer: I see. So, a U.S. Senator or a State Senator?

McVay: I believe it was a U.S. Senator. And I’m not – now, that was – Interviewer: That’s just what you’ve heard?

McVay: That’s hearsay, okay? So I – and I – (pause) there was a lot of pressure in the Park Service, at that time, to fulfill – and I don’t have issues with this, as long as people are qualified – to fulfill (pause) equality, you know. You know what I’m saying?

Interviewer: Oh, I see. Right. Yes.

McVay: Okay. So, I don’t know whether that came to bear or not. I know that – I know that, when Cheryl Brown was selected, I talked to staff members who cried on the phone. And I also know that she had a meeting with her staff where she told them if anybody was unhappy, they could get out.

Interviewer: Okay. So, she was still president of Brown Foundation when this happened?

McVay: She had recused herself. Interviewer: From Brown Foundation? McVay: From Brown Foundation.

Interviewer: Okay. In order to become the superintendent? McVay: That’s correct.

Interviewer: Okay. And were – do you know if there was staff that left as a result of this?

McVay: No, I do not know. I do not know. I doubt that any of those staff – you know, those people had jobs. They had families. They couldn’t just walk out.

Interviewer: Yes. Yeah. Right. Okay. Now, as I understand it, the Brown Foundation had input into what was in the educational bookstore at some point. Was that part of the cooperative agreement, or was that just some other sort of –?

McVay: You know, I don’t remember that being in the – in the – in the agreement. I don’t recall, okay?

Interviewer: Okay. And then, at some point, the park decided to go with one of the national monument – Eastern National – I don’t know what it is for that particular park. Midwest –?

McVay: I think I know what you’re talking about, but I don’t – I don’t recall. Interviewer: So, that wasn’t any –?

McVay: That’s not clear to me at all. If it was in the agreement, I don’t recall it.

Interviewer: Okay. So, when Eastern National comes in, or Western National comes in, do they – are they under a cooperative agreement, or are they under some other kind of contract?

McVay: You know, I think they are under cooperative agreements, but I couldn’t speak to that authoritatively. I think they are.

Interviewer: Okay. So, you don’t remember being – administering a cooperative agreement with Eastern National or whatever it was?

McVay: No. And Eastern – those Eastern National – those guys – those were agreements that were administered out of D.C.

Interviewer: Oh, I see. Okay. So, all of those are agreements administered out of D.C.? McVay: I think so.

Interviewer: So they’re not within the Midwest agreements?

McVay: They’re not regional agreements. I think those are national agreements. And I am not certain, but I know that I never administered an agreement with Eastern National or Western National or any of those. No, I never did any of those.

Interviewer: Okay. I don’t know which – which one –or Western, or Midwestern National, whatever it was. I think it’s called Jefferson Memorial Monuments or something. It’s odd. It’s different from the other – the national educational materials providers for parks. Okay. So, then, Cheryl’s tenure as superintendent lasted one year and ended in December, on December 31, 2010. Was that when the Memorandum of Agreement was – was it cancelled, or was it – just run out, just not renewed?

McVay: You know, I don’t believe we renewed it. And you know, I can’t remember that, exactly.

Now, this is how – this is – well – because – Interviewer: (Laughs) You’ve blocked out all that?

McVay: I was interviewed. I talked to the Department of Justice. They came to our office. They reviewed my files. I made all my files available to them. They reviewed them. I had occasion – when Cheryl was superintendent of the park, she was supposed to have recused herself from the Brown Foundation. And I was – there was something going on, and it may have been this whole thing with the Department of Justice – that I was holding a payment – a payment for them, okay? And I will tell you this: I was constrained from doing my job.

Interviewer: By?

McVay: By the politics in the office. So, when I was trying to administer the agreement as a – as a Contracting Officer, there were some things I was told I couldn’t do. They were all –

Interviewer: By your supervisor?

McVay: Yes. Even though they were – higher up than my supervisor – even though they were things that I, as a Contracting Officer – I was supposed to be doing. And I had a conversation – this was when the Department of Justice was looking at this relationship – and I don’t know what – I’m not sure. It may have been the hiring of Cheryl Brown as the superintendent of the park that triggered everything. I’m not sure. I had a call – I had a conversation with her Chief Financial Officer.

Interviewer: With Cheryl’s –?

McVay: With Cheryl’s – with the Brown Foundation’s Chief Financial Officer, and I said something to him, and he said to me, “Well, I’ll have to check with Cheryl about that.” And I got off the phone with him, and I –

Interviewer: And this was when she was supposed to have recused herself?

McVay: She was superintendent. And I got off the phone with him, and I called my Department – my contact at the Department of Justice, and said, “This guy is checking with the park superintendent before he does things related to this agreement.” Which was not – if she had recused herself, that was not right. It was not correct. It was out of order.

Interviewer: Okay. So, was this before or after the Justice Department came to visit you?

McVay: Well, I knew about – it may have been – I am not positive about that. I can’t recall whether it was before or after. I’m thinking that it may have been after, because I had a contact at DOJ regarding this, by that time.

Interviewer: Okay. What – I mean, I’m sure you know – what prompted them to come visit your office and get your – want to look at your documentation? Or are saying you are not sure if it was hiring Cheryl Brown that started this or some other thing?

McVay: I’m not sure. I don’t – I don’t know. I just know, they did – they came, and they were doing an audit of the – of the agreement. It was – to my way of thinking, it was very unusual.

Interviewer: Mmm-hmm. It was DOJ, not GSA?

McVay: No, it was the Department of Justice. I’m just pretty certain about that. (Pause) I think it was quite unusual for them to have hired Cheryl Brown Henderson as superintendent of the park, and I think that it’s very possible that it triggered some kind of complaint.

There were things – and I did – I – and I – just – now, this is – you’ll decide what you want to do. (Laughter) I know that I talked to people in the personnel office at the Midwest Region, and Cheryl Brown was afforded perks that were not ordinarily given to somebody who was just being hired for the first time ever.

Interviewer: As a superintendent?

McVay: As an employee. Because, for instance, she got loaded up. If you know the Park Service, you get annual leave and – incremental for your time service. No, that didn’t happen with her. She got the whole shebang, right at the very –

Interviewer: She got all – I did think it was interesting that she was hired as a superintendent, because, in my experience, the Park Service hires – sort of, hires from within and moves people up the ladder. You start at a –

McVay: Yes, there’s a – Ranger.

Interviewer: Ranger or even maintenance worker, or whatever, and then, you generally – then, gradually work your way up through parks – through different parks, so you get lots of the experience –

McVay: That’s correct. That is correct. It was very – it was very unusual. Interviewer: Okay. Alright. So, that was – that didn’t happen often in the Park Service?

McVay: And I think, if anything triggered that that audit, it might have been that. But I, honestly, don’t know. But I would not have – the staff – the staff at the park was dismayed by the – by her selection. And I don’t know if you’ve talked to the staff at the park, but –

Interviewer: I had not talked to the – any of the staff at the park who was there at the time. McVay: Oh! None of them are there?

Interviewer: No. Well – Treva. Treva’s still there.

McVay: Is Treva still there? Interviewer: Treva’s still there.

McVay: Are you going to talk to her?

Interviewer: I have actually talked to her. I want to take that back. (Pause) Her comments were circumspect about the events surrounding that time period. But she’s the Facilities Manager, so most of our questions to her had to do with the maintenance of the building, the kind of things that they did for the president’s visit – those kind of things because she is the only one who can tell us those things for the Administrative History. So, we concentrated on what kind of changes have been made to the building, and –

McVay: Oh. And, you see, the thing is, Treva and I know each other pretty well because I was the Contracting Officer on the renovation of the building.

Interviewer: Right. Good! You can answer a question I asked – that I asked her, but I didn’t really get a good answer: when they did the rehabilitation of the building, apparently, there was an early design – this is something she told me after we turned off the – after we turned off the recording device – there was an earlier design that was really complicated and expensive that was, then, shelved for a more, I guess, straightforward and simple – something to do with building a stage. What she said was, “The earliest design – they wanted to put in a stage, and I said, ‘My gosh! I just tore out a stage!’” And so I didn’t get a chance – because I wanted to find out if there was a – if the design that was used for rehabilitating the building, based on the Value Analysis, was what they originally intended to do, or if they decided to do something different because of budgets, or time frames, or discoveries, you know, of –?

McVay: That – the only thing I can tell you about that is I do not know if there was an earlier design. I was probably the Contracting Officer on the design that was used.

Interviewer: Did you go to the Value Analysis, or did you just –? McVay: No, I wouldn’t have done that. I administered – Interviewer: You just administered it after it was –?

McVay: Yeah. I just administered – awarded and administered – I don’t even know if I awarded that contract. Someone else might have awarded that in Contracting. I wasn’t the only Contracting Officer working on architect and engineering services, so it might have been someone else. I know who did it: Quinn Evans Architect.

Interviewer: Yeah. Okay. So, you may know – you probably know this question: during the course of the construction, were there changes – any changes made to the – to the plan – to the design because of unforeseen conditions, or budget constraints, or – I don’t know – anybody – any other thing? Or did they pretty much follow the design as drawn?

McVay: I think – the only thing I think might have happened was there was some question about fire suppression and the way it was put in because of the – you know, the design guys, they have some sort of – and engineering guys – they have some sort of idea about

what things should happen. And the guys that are actually putting this stuff in, they have ideas because they actually work in the local area. So they may have – I know – I remember a conflict between those two things, but I don’t remember how it was resolved.

Interviewer: Okay. So, there was a conflict between the designers and the installers? McVay: The designers – that’s correct. Which –

Interviewer: Over the fire suppression?

McVay: Over the fire suppression, or water supply, or some kind of something.

Interviewer: Okay. What about over water – yeah, water supply? Treva mentioned that there was – it was a phased construction project, so exterior, then interior, then exhibits, and that there were some things that were moved from one phase to another because the local contractor said, “This doesn’t make any sense.” For instance (laughter) – for instance, a sidewalk was supposed to be laid, and the contractor said, “Why are we doing this?

Because we’ll just have to tear it up again for the water?”

McVay: (Laughs) Now, Treva would have a better handle on that than I because I wasn’t there on the ground. I did go down to the – to the site a number of times. I traveled down there, but I don’t – I don’t remember – but that rings a bell with me. But Treva would be much more –

Interviewer: Yeah, well, that was what she told us, and I –

McVay: Yeah, that doesn’t surprise me. It was crazy. I mean, there were things – it was a huge project, and things happened, like I remember that we – there – there’s a door, you know, and they got what they thought were the lighting – what do you call those?

Things! For outside the door. And they were, like, five feet tall! (Laughter) So, they’re probably still in the basement. Because, you know, they should have been about like this (illustrates with hands), and they were huge. And it was just – it was one of those things. It was one of the – it was something that the architects spec-ed.

Interviewer: It was a design error?

McVay: It was a design error. We never did anything about those, though.

Interviewer: (Laughs) Okay. Maybe you just said, “Well, maybe we can use them later for something somewhere?”

McVay: Well, I don’t know where they would use them! Planet X – I don’t know. We did some things in that building that just made me crazy but –

Interviewer: Like what?

McVay: Tanya Bradley, another Contracting Officer at the Park Service, was my – sort of, my cohort on this – colleague. And we went down there one time, and we went up on the second floor. We had them pull up the original wood flooring, refinish it, and put it back down. And we went up there, and we’re up on the second floor, and they were stapling

down – you know what luan is? Okay, they were stapling down luan over the top of those refinished floors because they were going to install carpet.

Interviewer: Oh, my gosh! So, under the carpet there is refinished –?

McVay: We spent about seventy-five thousand dollars on that refinished wooden floor. And it was just – we were just – we turned to each other and just –

Interviewer: So, was that in the design that carpet would –?

McVay: It was in the design. It was in the design. And they didn’t want to have those wooden floors because it was going to be creaking and noisy.

Interviewer: Noisy, yeah. But, why refinish them if you’re going to cover them with – so, they called for it to be refinished, and then they also called for it to be covered with carpet?

McVay: I – yeah. Sometimes, you know, these things are so – well, for one thing, government funding is screwy. You never get your money when you’re supposed to. I never worked in a year when we got money in September or October, when we’re supposed to. We were always getting it in March or April. So, then you’ve got to rush and spend it. And, sometimes, you spend it stupid.

Interviewer: Yes. And that was one of those times, right?

McVay: Well, it just was – some – one of those things where somebody just was not thinking straight when they reviewed those plans, you know? And they’re reviewed by a lot of people who are – know – who know what they’re doing. I’m not one of them, because I didn’t review these plans because I’m not an architect. I’m not an engineer. I’m just administering.

Interviewer: You’re just administering, right? Okay. I do think it’s odd that the architect, who probably called for those floors to be refinished, also called for those floors to be covered in carpet, but okay. So, you said you went down to Brown v. Board. Had you seen Brown v. Board before then, at all? When was the first time you went there?

McVay: I’m not – I probably was down there before they did the exterior. I administered all sections – all parts of that.

Interviewer: Okay. So, all of the – okay, so – oh, so you’re the one who told Treva she couldn’t hire people to take away the trash, probably?

McVay: Did I tell her that?

Interviewer: Maybe. She said, when she first started, you know, she didn’t really – she’d had some training in plumbing, electrical, and carpentry, but she wasn’t really given good direction, and so she didn’t – people just said, “Here, maintain this building.”

McVay: Okay. I was not down there at the very beginning, when the building was awful, filled with junk, there – had been used for, you know, all kinds of purposes. I was not there. By the time I got down there, the building had been cleaned out, and –

Interviewer: Okay, so was this before the president visited in 2004 or after? McVay: Was it in 2004 that the president was there for the Dedication? Interviewer: That was the Dedication.

McVay: Yeah. Oh, yeah.

Interviewer: So, you were there before that?

McVay: We were – we were just about – we were – were we done? Interviewer: Yes. In 2004, you were done.

McVay: We were done with the – with the construction, yeah. And that’s why he’s there – Dedication, yeah.

Interviewer: Yeah. And so, you had been there before that, looking at the building?

McVay: Oh, I had been there – I’d been down there in the course of administering the construction. I was down there for meetings with the contractors and all – and just to review what was going on. Yeah, I was down there, probably, at least – I want to say several times, but I was down there.

Interviewer: You were down there. So, one of the first things that was done was the replacement of the flat rolled roof. Were you the Contract Administrator for that? That was pretty early in the –

McVay: Okay. If it was early, and if it was separate from the big contract, I probably wasn’t in charge of it.

Interviewer: Okay. How long did that rehabilitation project take? It must have taken several years, - like –?

McVay: It took a long time. And I can’t tell you – I don’t recall how long it was, but it was over a period of time. But it doesn’t seem like it was – you know, when time goes by so fast? You really don’t think it – no, it doesn’t – it doesn’t seem like it took very long, but it was – yeah.

Interviewer: Yeah. Okay. So, when – do you recall, when you first saw Brown v. Board, what it – what its condition was? What was your first impression?

McVay: Well, I thought its condition was – you know, I loved that building! It’s a wonderful building. It was more wonderful before than it is after. There was a space in that building – the gym – the gymnasium – the kindergarten room – and I don’t know if you seen – you’ve probably looked at pictures –

Interviewer: I’ve seen it. I’ve been there a couple of times.

McVay: Okay, but the gymnasium – you’ve seen it now, with the – full of exhibits? Interviewer: Well, I – that was – yeah, full of exhibits.

McVay: Oh, that was a beautiful space, with big, tall windows on one side. Oh, it was gorgeous! It was gorgeous. And they closed all of that up. Oh, yeah. So, I mean, you – when they rehabilitate and re-use, you know, they’re changing the –

Interviewer: Adaptively re-use?

McVay: Yeah. There’s just a – you’re changing and re-using it, and some of the spaces – they were just so beautiful, you know, that it was a shame. But that’s just a personal – that’s personal – that’s so personal, you know? I loved that gymnasium. It was a beautiful room – beautiful floor, the beautiful windows, and they put the –

Interviewer: Yeah, it’s too bad about the windows. McVay: Yeah, they put the exhibits in there and –

Interviewer: Windows are – for the National Park – Register nomination – are critical.

McVay: Oh, and then we – the windows were – the windows in that building were very difficult. Interviewer: Well, the windows – the window sashes were metal, which is –

McVay: Yes. Very difficult. Very difficult. Yes.

Interviewer: Yeah. I was surprised that the window sashes were metal.

McVay: Yeah. They’re difficult. I remember those windows. (Laughter) But it was a – you know, it – and they put in an elevator, which was very problematic, because –

Interviewer: Oh, that wasn’t always – that wasn’t there? They didn’t have one before?

McVay: Hmm-mmm. No. Oh, no. Because the water table there is so high that it was difficult to get the – put the elevator pit in. But there was difficulty about that. Yeah. You get – I don’t think you can do a construction project that has anything that’s – you know, we just replaced the galvanized pipes in my plumbing at my house. (Laughs) You can’t do anything without issues coming up. It was, like, a two thousand-dollar project. You know, if you’ve got millions of dollars, things – there are things that just go wonky, and things that are difficult. And things that are difficult because you just didn’t – you didn’t have a hands-on at the very beginning.

Interviewer: Mmm-hmm. Did you have someone who went down – not you – who went down to monitor what the contractors were – subcontractors were doing – the contractors were doing – a liaison?

McVay: Oh, yeah. Oh, yeah. Oh, yeah. The – first of all, the architects and engineers sometimes went down there, the contracted (unintelligible). And people from our office were – architects and engineers would go down and review the work.

Interviewer: Okay. Because I was looking at the – I was looking at the mortar color. And it’s quite an unusual color for mortar.

McVay: Mmm-hmm. It’s pinkish.

Interviewer: Pinkish - yeah. And I wondered if they had difficulties matching that color.

McVay: I don’t know. They – you know, they get kind of sticky about that stuff. And I’m pretty certain I was down there a couple of times with the architect, Chavez.

Interviewer: That was the architect’s name?

McVay: That was the guy from our office. And I can’t think what his first name is, which is just awful!

Interviewer: (Laughs) Mr.?

McVay: Mr. Chavez, yeah. No, I was – I was down there at times with the – with the architects from our office, with the – and with the contractor – the contractor that did this design.

Interviewer: Okay. Did you get any kind of a feel for how the public in Topeka perceived the park, over the years? No?

McVay: No, not really. I think that the – in other words, there were educational programs that incorporated – that used the park as a site for day trips, school trips, stuff like that.

That’s one of their major things, I think, that they do. Interviewer: Yeah, there were several of them while we were there.

McVay: Yeah, busloads of kids, so – but I didn’t – I didn’t have contact with the community.

Interviewer: Oh, okay. Alright. So, when you first started working with Brown v. Board, did you have any kind of expectations about what – what the – what your relationship with them would be?

McVay: Probably not.

Interviewer: Just normal, everyday park things?

McVay: Normal, everyday park things. But I really – I – particularly with some members of the staff down there, I grew to have a good relationship.

Interviewer: Okay. And, what would you say was the – were the biggest challenges to monitor – to administering the contracts for that building – for that site?

McVay: The agreement?

Interviewer: The agreement or the – or the construction – or the construction contracts, either of those, since you did all that stuff?

McVay: You know, I don’t – with the contract for the construction, I really think there was no more than just ordinary stuff. You know, with the bumps that you get during construction. With the agreement, I have a couple of memories. Marty Sterkel, who was – and I don’t know what his title is – he worked in the office. He worked in Land and Water Conservation.

Interviewer: Do you know how to spell his last name?

McVay: S-T-E-R-K-E-L. He and I traveled to Brown and we had a – Bess Sherman was the superintendent at the time. She was short-lived. We had to do a arbitration between the Brown Foundation and the park superintendent –

Interviewer: Bess Sherman?

McVay: They – yes. They did not see eye to eye. Interviewer: They did not get along?

McVay: They were having issues, and Bess, probably with some validity, was having issues with what it was that Brown [Foundation] was doing. It just – what it – she wanted to know what she was getting. And we were giving them a hundred thousand dollars a year. So that’s important, you know. And she –

Interviewer: Okay, so was she – was she – would you say she one of the most vocal people to say, “I’m not getting what I think I’m supposed to get?”

McVay: I think that she had the – I think (pause) probably. She was superintendent for just a very short period of time, and then, I think, Steve Adams was the superintendent during the construction. I’m pretty certain. Steve’s a pretty easy-going guy, easy to work with. And, now, I do recall – you know – I don’t know what happened to the agreement, but I know that I went down to a meeting after the superintendent subsequent to Cheryl Brown was hired – a guy from D.C. David Smith – is that correct?

Interviewer: I believe so.

McVay: Okay. And we went to a meeting where a lot of – all parties were – so, park staff, Brown Foundation, and we had a meeting about what was going on and what was happening. And it could - it got quite contentious because – well, you can imagine that, by that time, the relationship between the Brown Foundation and the park was falling apart, and I don’t even know what the status of the agreement was at that time. I just know – I just recall this meeting.

Interviewer: Okay. And so, you went down to an arbitration meeting?

McVay: It was a meeting, and I don’t know exactly what the circumstances were or why we were there, but –

Interviewer: I was going to say, what was the purpose of this meeting besides getting you all together?

McVay: Marty, I think, was there again. Marty Sterkel was there again. He kind of was the point guy for dealing with sensitive sorts of things.

Interviewer: That’s interesting, given his (pause) portfolio, I guess.

McVay: Is it? Okay, see, I – anyway, he was with – he was Land and Water Conservation. And that’s – and they did agreements, you see. They did a very specific agreement, though, under the Land and Water Conservation Act. I did agreements of every variety for everybody.

Interviewer: Okay, so did he go because he’s good at arbitrating these agreements?

McVay: He may have gone because he was Agreements – he knew about agreements. Because, in both of these situations – and I don’t remember. You know, I remember the one with Bess Sherman – that we were there to try to mediate between Brown Foundation and the superintendent. But the meeting was –

Interviewer: Okay. And that was, I take it, unsuccessful? Or did you think it was successful at the time?

McVay: It was successful because Bess left. And that may have been political, as well. But, you know, there’s a lot of politics, and that’s one of the things I don’t miss at all. So – but the – I don’t know whether it was just, like, a “Let’s just get to know each other” thing, that we went down there when David Smith came, or what it was. And I know there were complaints from the Brown Foundation that day that the – they did not believe that the staff was as – my gosh, I can’t think of these words! They didn’t think it was as racially mixed as it should be. And – (pause).

Interviewer: Oh! Okay. Alright. Did they have a – did they specify their preference, or did they just make that –?

McVay: I just think that that was one of the things that came up during the meeting. And there was – there was a racial mix in that staff, at that park.

Interviewer: And there is now.

McVay: Oh, yeah. There always was. So – but I can’t remember. It may have been just the advent of the new superintendent, but it – because the park staff was there, the members of Brown Foundation –

Interviewer: Well, I’m interviewing him. I’ll ask him.

McVay: Ask him. And the members of the Brown Foundation were there, as well.

Interviewer: Okay. So, at that point, then, they were still – it was – your relationship was still intact?

McVay: My memory is so wonky on this. You know, I don’t know if the agreement was still intact, but it seems to indicate, because they were there, that there was still something going on.

Interviewer: Yeah, because it seems like the – if everything had fallen apart, they wouldn’t be coming to your meeting.

McVay: They wouldn’t – they wouldn’t have been there for any reason.

Interviewer: Right. Okay. Yeah. Okay. Well, let’s move to – I want to be sure not to get kicked out of the library – have somebody calling, “Time!” Regarding the work that you’ve done for Brown v. Board, what are you most proud of doing for the site?

McVay: Well, I hate to say it, when there was so much wrong with it, but the construction.

Interviewer: The construction? Doing the rehabilitation?

McVay: Oh, yeah. Oh, yeah. That was one of the best things ever.

Interviewer: Okay (laughs), I’ve got to write down – and you think that was one of the most effective things that you’ve done to shape the way the site developed? Or do you think managing that agreement was one of the most effective things you did to –?

McVay: Well, this is – no. I think that, if I had any impact on the discontinuation of the agreement with Brown Foundation, that may have been the most effective thing that I did. If I have any – but I didn’t have any say in that. That’s not – somebody else ended – had the say in whether or not that agreement –

Interviewer: It wasn’t you?

McVay: It wasn’t me. But I do know that I’ve had contact with Justice. I do know I made that call that one day and said, “You know, if she has recused herself from this, she should not be being consulted by her Financial Officer about payment processes.” I was upset by that because I – you know, I just was. I was.

Interviewer: Yeah. Okay. So, we’ve talked about quite a few things. Is there anything that you wanted to talk about that I haven’t asked you about? Something that you said to yourself, as you came down here, “Oh, I hope she asks me this question! I can hardly wait to tell her about it.” (Laughs)

McVay: No, I was not – no, it’s really – you’ve – I’ve talked about as much as I can recall, and you did ask me about things that I thought you probably would ask me about.

Interviewer: Okay. Well, then, I’m going to turn off the recording device.

McVay: You certainly are free to call me if you think of something else that you want. Interviewer: Sure. Okay.

END OF INTERVIEW