

Jim McLean: Hello, I'm Jim McLean, a member of the Kansas Oral History Project board and a mostly retired reporter for Kansas newspapers and public radio stations. Today is June 30th, 2026. We're in Manhattan at the home of former Kansas Governor John Carlin to interview him about his years as the archivist of the United States.

This interview is part of a Kansas Oral History Project series of conversations with notable Kansans. The Kansas Oral History Project is a nonprofit corporation that collects and preserves the oral histories of Kansans. The project is supported by donations from generous individuals and occasional grants. Our videographer is former Kansas State Representative David Heinemann.

Welcome, Governor. Thanks for housing us in your home. I appreciate it.

John Carlin: Thank you.

JM: Now, for context, your public service career includes stints in the Kansas House of Representatives. You were speaker for a couple of years. Then two consecutive four-year terms as governor, the first person to do that, right?

JC: Yes.

JM: And then to what we're here to talk about today. You became the archivist of the United States. Just kind of for starters, how did a dairy farmer/governor from Kansas get that position?

JC: Well, it's an interesting story, to say the least. Obviously, I was not a traditional selection. Clinton—of course, I'd helped Bill Clinton quite a bit to get elected. It was set up where we were friends.

JM: And you were governors at the same time.

JC: We were governors at the same time. In the old system, the states got together—we were together in Arkansas and Kansas and so forth. But when he got elected, there was a vacancy as the archivist.

JM: Let's talk about that for just a second. Don Wilson had resigned about a year previous. He was also a Kansan, but he left under a bit of a cloud, right?

JC: Yes.

JM: What was that? Did that complicate your nomination?

JC: No, there was a time. Time went on. Two years.

JM: Oh, really? Two years for an acting person in that job, right?

JC: Correct. You have to go back with the history of the Archives. When the Archives, FDR, the mid-thirties, and the historians were behind it. There was no archival profession at the time. All my predecessors were PhD historians in basically that field. That was just kind of the way it worked. Then the archival profession came along. So, when Clinton was dealing with that vacancy, each side would have their person that they wanted, and they would shoot each other down. It went by for two years. A couple of folks one who had political connections to Senator Bob Dole. Then a friend of mine in Kansas City who I did not know worked at the Archives. I just played bridge with him in Topeka on a regular basis called me after the '94 election and said, "How would you like to be archivist of the United States?"

JM: Just out of the blue.

JC: Out of the blue. Of course, what was really funny about it was when Bill got elected, White, the governor of Texas, called me right away and said, "I've got a friend, Bill Hardesty. He wants to be archivist of the United States." I'd never heard of the Archives or anything.

JM: But he got you to write a letter of recommendation for him.

JC: He got me to write a letter, which I thought was a joke, but. I did it. The first thing I said when my friend called was, "What happened to Hardesty?" They kept fighting back and forth, the two sides, and he was not a historian or an archivist. Neither side wanted to support him. They fought for two years, and these two gentlemen decided, "Maybe Bill Clinton will nominate Carlin. We'd get Bob Dole to support pushing him through the Senate, we got our man." and that's how it happened.

JM: That's how it happened. But the archivists and the historians, given the fact that every one of your predecessors had been a historian, weren't wild about your nomination either at first, were they?

JC: Oh, no, no. Both sides were violently against—I remember the hearing. I had Bob Dole sitting behind me, and John Glenn was the Democrat. There's not a great attendance at hearings, on low-level situations like this. Of course, Glenn had helped me. I had helped him. But the White House did not want me in my presentation opening to defend myself. They just wanted me to straight background, boom, boom.

JM: "This is John Carlin who was the governor. "

MH: Yes. I knew why they didn't like me, and I wanted to tell my story first before they had a chance to fire at me that I was associated with authentic records much earlier in life than they were.

JM: Yes.

JC: I grew up in a family of registered Holsteins where blood tests—I mean, records were taken very seriously, and so I understood the value of records.

JM: Yes, you told that story.

JC: I told that story in my opening. But, of course, they fired away at me. But I survived, and Dole put it through the Senate pretty efficiently.

JM: How much credit do you give Bob Dole for helping you get the position?

JC: Pardon?

JM: Bob Dole. Bob Dole was a bit of a partisan. Everybody knows that.

JC: Oh, yes.

JM: But still he was fully behind your nomination.

JC: Yes. I always use him as an example of what it was like then and what it is now. There was nothing in those days of what politics is like today. Yes, there was competition. I mean, Dole and [Senator George] McGovern, food stamps.

JM: And he was in your corner for this one. He helped you get through.

JC: Bob Dole? Absolutely.

JM: So, you survived the confirmation process. All of a sudden, you are the archivist of the United States, and you arrive at this massive agency, which had been leaderless for a couple of years.

JC: Yes.

JM: What were your first impressions of the place?

JC: Well, I'll give you an experience. I hadn't been there very long. The OMB on the budget—

JM: Office of Management of Budget, right.

JC: They were bringing back the initial response to what the Archives had requested. I was listening to the report, and a cut here, a cut there. They got done and looked at me. I said, "Well, now what's the next step?" They thought a second and said, "We don't appeal."

JM: Yes, there is no next step.

JC: "We're a small agency." And I said, "Folks, they think they've found fat, and they're going to be back next year to get more." I learned very quickly—they were brilliant historians, brilliant archivists, but when it came to managing and the politics of getting a budget, they were at the mercy of the executive and just took what they got.

JM: So, that's why you were better suited for the job than some people might have imagined because you had all of that political experience, and that's what that agency needed at the time was some political acumen.

JC: It was a combination of things that I brought. The politics, the big project we got, redoing the downtown facility, required a lot of money just for plumbing and electrical. We did a lot of other things, of course, obviously.

JM: So, you told your staff—

JC: The Clintons got me the money.

JM: That's a story we're going to cover down the road a little bit. But the point of that is is that you got there. Really, it's a small agency, but really it's widespread and fairly massive. It's not like the Pentagon or the Defense Department, but you have, what? Fifteen or sixteen regional offices?

JC: You've got regional archive record centers, regional archives, and the presidential library system, and then major facilities for storage of records in DC that nobody knows about.

JM: So, it's far-flung.

JC: Yes.

JM: And you had about 2,500 employees.

JC: Yes.

JM: That's no simple task to manage all that.

JC: Right. Very similar to when I was governor, I always understood—the key was getting people to work that I felt confident in. I had some good people to work with. They just needed to be trained a little bit in terms of being more aggressive, and then I brought in Ren Calhoun.

JM: Yes, explain that, who he is.

JC: The Mormons and their records—I think it was their family—

JM: Genealogical.

JC: Yes, correct. I don't know how the initial connection, but I hired him. He was just one special human being, brilliant on records and ideas and creative ways to do a better job of taking care of the records, getting them organized, getting them out, and getting them used.

JM: One of the things you encountered when you first got there, too, like any agency, like any organization, particularly one that had not had strong leadership for a couple of years, there were a lot of silos.

JC: Oh, yes.

JM: You had various departments and so forth, and they weren't very collaborative in a way. There was a lot of competition, a lot of power struggles, that kind of thing that you had to get on top of when you first got there.

JC: Yes. They were not used to coming together as a team. They ran their own silo and didn't want to be bothered, and they were good people. I inherited a lot of talent. They just didn't have the talent or experience to deal with big government and getting resources. And then the other thing, I upgraded the Foundation. The Foundation was—

JM: Let's explain a little bit about the—you had Archives themselves, but you had the Foundation that was in existence to raise money for projects that the government wouldn't fund.

JC: But they didn't do anything. In fact, interestingly enough, my predecessor asked me to be on the board, and I went back to one meeting and decided I wasn't going to waste my time.

JM: So years before you got the job, you were asked to be on the Foundation.

JC: Yes, about four years before, something like that. I kind of forgot about the experience.

JM: So, what did you do to enliven it, to make it more purposeful?

JC: Well, first of all, I had a talent. Charles Guggenheim—anybody that knows anything about films—I forget what they were called, special short films. I think he won one or two Oscars. A great human being, and he brought some thinking, ideas, and so forth. Tom Wheeler, I brought in later who was just brilliant and a leader and so forth and was the kind of talent I needed to start raising money to do what I wanted to do. When the reporter from *The New York Times* went through the Rotunda—and this wasn't—I hadn't been there for very long. It might have been my first year—and then wrote a short story in the *Times*. It was published. The clipping came through, and I looked at it. She said, "You know, I walked through the Rotunda and saw the Charters of Freedom, and it was little more than a religious experience." I said, "That's not what we want. We want people to get a sense of history."

JM: Context around the documents.

JC: And start appreciating why records are important. That was literally the beginning of what we did. I didn't have the talent to carry it forward, but I knew something had to be done, and that's where Ren played a major role and others and plus getting Charlie Guggenheim. Charlie Guggenheim understood what I wanted to do. He got us started, and Tom Wheeler had the talent to really make things happen.

JM: There's a couple of directions I want to take the conversation based on that. So, the Charters of Freedom, the Bill of Rights, the Declaration of Independence, and the Constitution.

JC: Correct.

JM: On display at the Archives.

JC: Yes.

JM: And the reporter's point was you come up to the Archives, and those documents are there, and you commune with these documents in an individual way, but that's it. There's nothing else around them. They're just there.

JC: It wasn't set up for them to understand. They had stood in a long line for quite some time to walk by them and pause. The reporter was correct. I'm thankful I saw that article.

JM: Going back to the time when you were governor, you were well known for surrounding yourself with—at the time you were governor, there were fairly young people on your staff, but all really sharp people.

JC: Very sharp.

JM: And you were famous for bringing everybody into a room when you had an issue to discuss, listening to everybody pretty much without interrupting, and then making decisions based on what you heard, but the point was your staff was important to you, and you wanted to replicate that when you got to the Archives.

JC: Well, you have to keep in mind, my degree was in dairy husbandry. I milked cows. Of course, we bred registered Holsteins.

JM: But you've also been a governor. Don't sell yourself short there.

JC: Yes, at that point, I had.

JM: I know you well enough to know that you recognize your own shortcomings. You try to fill in the blanks with the people around you, but you're not short of confidence. You knew what you wanted to do. You just needed the people to help you do it.

JC: I always credited 4-H. That was the training that made things happen.

JM: How so?

JC: You learn how to run a meeting, projects, talks, demonstrations, and so forth. And then judging teams—

JM: I was hoping we'd get to this.

JC: You want to go there now?

JM: Yes, go ahead.

JC: Judging teams—

JM: Judging livestock, right?

JC: Well, I was in dairy cattle first, and then I got into livestock because I had too much success on dairy. I was no longer qualified. Once you win, you're out. I had to shift to livestock. When you go to a judging contest, you have four animals, and you've got to make a decision in eight minutes of how you want to place them, 1, 3, 2, 4, for an example, and have a small card to make a few notes, and then you go to about ten classes in the morning. You know that about five or six of them, you're going to give reasons in the afternoon. And in those days, of course, it was a smoke-filled room. These older gentlemen, there were no women, all men, they had a tendency of wanting to smoke cigars. You wanted to get to that room as fast as possible. If you were late in line, when you got there, they were pretty testy.

The point is, you had to make decisions and defend them. I think because I had it in FFA [Future Farmers of America], I had it in 4-H, in university, both dairy, because we won the first time. I was on the junior team, and then I lost my eligibility. So, I switched to livestock and was on Don Good's livestock team. I was not very good. I only had one good day.

JM: How old were you at this time?

JC: I used my dairy judging eligibility my freshman at K-State and then on the livestock team, I started as a junior.

JM: Am I mistaken or wasn't your first trip to Washington somehow related to your judging? Wasn't there a story about that based on your judging?

JC: I gave a promotional talk. The 4-H leader happened to be at the regional competition, liked it. He said, "I want you to do it at 4-H Round-up." I gave it again. Then they came up to me afterwards and said, "We'd like to put you on the train this next weekend to Chicago. You'll represent or compete for whoever is going to present the annual report to the President of the United States." Overnight, I had no sophistication. Somehow, I pulled it off and was selected to be one of the six.

Now, let's face it. I had an advantage. Kansas, Eisenhower, I think I did ok.

JM: But you went to DC on behalf of 4-H.

JC: Yes. Conrad Hilton, Sr. hosted us. I got a chance to make the presentation to President Eisenhower of a tree to be planted at Gettysburg. I've always thought about I should go to Gettysburg some time and see that tree, but I have not done it.

JM: You should. We took that little diversion, but I think it's important to understand that you knew what you were good at. You knew what you wanted to do.

JC: I knew my strengths, and I also knew my weaknesses. That's why it was a team effort.

JM: So, you saw the issues in front of you when you got to the Archives, and you embarked on a pretty extensive strategic planning process, one that really hadn't happened at that agency, perhaps not ever, but you embarked on this thing, and you were in a hurry to get it done. Describe the process.

JC: It wasn't a lengthy process. I took some time. I needed to get Ren Calhoun on board, for example. Within my first year, we were on the way to reorganize things and have a plan. We wanted people to understand why records were important, not just keep records, and if somebody needed them, they got access to them.

JM: Why it's essential to have these records to keep them in a way that makes them available to the public and to researchers.

JC: We also wanted the public to understand we keep records for individuals. If you're a service member and you want to make sure, you're qualified, your record at St. Louis, one of our major facilities for records, your record had to be kept, preserved. So, there was that connection and other connections. We kept census records and any federal record. It was up to us to preserve them for accessibility for various uses by the public.

JM: That's a good point though because when a lot of people think of the National Archives, they think of presidential records and Congressional records and so forth, but it's much more than that.

JC: Oh, yes, yes, yes. I always use the example, one of my new board members on the foundation told a story about a friend he had that got in trouble. He was a big contractor doing something with the Corps of Engineers, I believe, but something happened in it, and there was a mistake made. The Corps said it was his fault, and they took him to court. It was a serious situation. He was probably going to have jail time if he got convicted. My friend on the board told me the experience. Somebody representing him decided to dig into the Corps records and found out it was the Corps's fault.

JM: Not his.

JC: Not his. It's an example I've used. Certified documents that had been kept, preserved, and are accessible for all sorts of reasons, not just for historic.

JM: Talk a little bit about that strategic planning process. What were your goals? How did you pull that off?

JC: Well, we had short-term issues as well as long, and we wanted to lay out—we established our values, what's important and then the basic goals and then under goals, steps to take and specifics. It was a process that we spent I would expect a year, a year and a half. I spent a lot of time traveling to go to all of our units to give them some background on what we were doing, why we were doing it, and we would want their input, and we got some very good participation. I think in the end, we produced a product that carried forth what we wanted to accomplish and put the Archives on a path to the future and preparing for the future.

JM: One of the major issues, well, a couple of things, one, when you went to all the far-flung places where the agency had facilities, had any of your predecessors ever done anything like that?

JC: I have no idea. I'm sure less because they were all historians basically, and the historians were focused on making sure the records were there when they did research. But part of their problem—historians didn't get access to the records until twenty years after they were created typically, and some not then, the classified records, for example. So, their use of records was always twenty years behind. When I got there, I remember their use of understanding that Clinton was creating electronic records every day. We were not prepared at all. I think it was because they were behind.

JM: As a matter of course, any records—

JC: The mindset was just—

JM: Any records that the historians wanted to access, historians or anyone else for that matter, wanted to access, they had to wait twenty years—this is just generally speaking as a matter of course, virtually all the records that you had, other than the personnel records, military personnel and that kind of thing?

JC: Those records would go whenever the person left service; they would go to St. Louis. They needed access to those. They were not thought of as typical historical records although they were used for studies and so forth. We had to just sort of reinvent a lot of our operations, start thinking more to the future, adjusting not just to electronic records coming along, but the fast-changing time and all the access issues, and then of course, I inherited the Nixon tapes and worked on them for ten years, and yet we were still not done [when I left].

JM: You say that the agency really wasn't prepared in any way for the 21st century and the record demands. I mean, electronic records particularly, the emails that were being created which can be very important in terms of understanding communication, issues, and so forth from the White House on down, the Archives just weren't really prepared to handle that? I think you called it a tsunami of records that were coming your way.

JC: Well, yes, and, of course, it goes back to hiring Ren Calhoun who brought the leadership talent and recognition of these challenges. That addition was incredibly important, particularly to the question you just asked.

JM: While you were there and while you were trying to reorganize the agency, make it more effective in modernizing, so to speak, there were these lingering issues that you inherited. One of those was the Nixon tapes. There was a prolonged legal battle about what you as the archivist was going to have access to and what you weren't going to have. The Nixon family was very protective of those tapes for obvious reasons. Talk about that a little bit. Where was that issue—what was the status of that issue when you arrived?

JC: It's very interesting because on my first week on the job, my first week in June of '95, I guess, I think that's right. Time goes, and I'm old. Anyway, Julie Nixon Eisenhower called me on my first Monday and said, "We want to settle." She was in my office on Thursday of that first week. That started the process, but it was a long, complicated process because one, it was under the direction or control of a federal judge. I dealt with that federal judge not personally, directly all ten years because those tapes, he bought cheap tape, President Nixon, and the machine ran twenty-four hours a day. We had cleaning lady noise and all sorts of things.

But you had to separate out personal—it was important that we separate that out because that should go to the Nixon family, political also at that time went to the president. Of course, we worked to get that back, and then you had regular records, so to speak, and classified. Within one short meeting with Henry Kissinger, all four of those would come up because Kissinger was close to the family, I'm sure a political advisor, certainly important to the administration. Seriously, we had, in order to do that, we had to get the final approval for every little [decision] from the federal judge. I'm sure that was a quick look. But the Nixon person on one side of the table and my person on the other side had to agree where to cut that, going from personal to political to whatever, and agree on that, and then move it forward.

JM: Let's try to paint the picture. You're sitting in a room, and they're listening to these tapes?

JC: Yes.

JM: They're having conversations as they're listening about what is a public record and what isn't.

JC: To be very honest, Jim, they might have been listening, maybe they had transcripts. They probably did.

JM: But they're having conversations contemporaneously about what's a public record and what isn't.

JC: Right.

JM: And they have to agree.

JC: Yes, they have to agree, and where the cut-off is. What is personal? What's political? And then, of course, somebody on my staff weighs in and says, "That's classified."

JM: Then the tapes themselves had to physically be cut, spliced?

JC: Yes.

JM: To comport with whatever the decision was?

JC: Yes. The classified had to be separated out. It was a long process that literally—she called me the first day I was there, and ten years later I leave, and we were half to two-thirds the way through the tapes.

JM: Meanwhile, there was a lot of pressure. There were lawsuits brought charging that you were dragging your feet on getting this done and getting this out to the public.

JC: Yes, we were constantly under pressure and understandably so. Historians were really anxious for those records. One of the interesting experiences that I had was we had a federal judge looking over our shoulders, and we would get a set that we would try to accomplish in a period of time and signed off with the judge, “We’re going to do that work, and we’ll report back.” It was the election year of Gore and—

JM: George W. Bush.

JC: W. We were working through, and you have to keep in mind that W’s father was very active in the Nixon administration—ambassador to China, CIA, very active. We had a deadline for August of that election year, and we were not going to make it.

JM: A deadline for getting all the tapes released by that year or just a certain—

JC: A segment. Just a segment. So, we had to go to the judge and explain. The judge said, “I’ll give you until the 10th of October.” Well, one of the things when we work at the Archives, politics. We’re sort of aware of what’s going on, but we don’t ever connect politics with our work. We’re dealing with old stuff.

So, we’re proceeding to having an opening of records on the 10th of October with the election about three weeks later. Interestingly enough, one of my foundation board members, the vice president of AT&T—I forget if it was AT&T at the time.

JM: People will understand.

JC: Was big in the Bush campaign. He called me up and got a meeting with me and reamed me out. “How in the hell can you do this three weeks before the election? Gore’s going to take advantage. Something will be there on”—

JM: He was worried that something incriminating would be on the tapes just before the election.

JC: Something embarrassing in some way, a potential that may be linked directly to W’s father. He said, “You just can’t do it.” I thought about it. I literally thought about it. I didn’t meet or—I said, “I can’t do that. I’ve got a federal judge watching me.”

JM: He wanted you to withhold the release of the tapes until after the election.

JC: Withhold until after the election. And I understood why he was asking, but I said, “Just pause a second here, Jim. If I do that, Gore will know I did it. People are watching this. You have to run the risk that they will find out and look what they can do with it. The National Archives have stopped releasing these. Obviously, there’s something incriminating in the Bush family, and Archivist Carlin is going to protect the Bushes. I don’t think that will work out very politically correct for you.” He still wasn’t very happy.

JM: So, you risked doing something that could be interpreted as political, no matter which decision you made.

JC: Regardless. Absolutely.

JM: But you decided, no, you were going to release them on schedule.

JC: On the federal judge, I didn’t know how he was going to react, and, secondly, I really felt that he was taking a real gamble. I made it clear to him. I said, “We work separate from politics. We are under a schedule, oversight from a federal judge. We don’t check the papers in the morning and see if there’s something going on politically that maybe we shouldn’t work today.”

JM: That’s one of the issues that dates all the way back to your confirmation, historians and archivists were worried because your background was largely political.

JC: Yes.

JM: That you would be partisan and political in the job.

JC: Of course.

JM: That was one of the issues, wasn’t it?

JC: Of course.

JM: So you were probably very careful not to—

JC: That’s why Dole sponsoring me and John Glenn sitting there when they were having the hearing tried to present, “We have confidence in him.”

JM: You dealt with a lot of other things, too. Interestingly, everybody’s still fascinated with the records associated with President John Kennedy’s assassination, and a lot of those reside at the Archives. One of the things that was again at issue was the Zapruder film, the film that essentially documented the event itself. The Archives had possession of it but didn’t own it. Was that the issue?

JC: That's right.

JM: So, that was pending, too.

JC: That was pending. We really weren't necessarily directly involved with that. What we did have, we talked about the Archives. We had record center facilities, too, and everything in that hospital room where he died, we have in a regional records center.

JM: Everything that was in that emergency room at Parkland Hospital?

JC: Everything, everything. Don't ask me why. It was all done by somebody else.

JM: That leads me to wonder, I don't know if you're prepared to answer this question, but what are some of the more fascinating things that you had in the collections that have real historical significance, things like that?

JC: Well, the presidential records and the presidential libraries, of course, have—not too long ago, I stopped in Abilene and looked at the museum again. Anybody listening to this, if you haven't been to Abilene to see the Eisenhower Museum, it is a real return to history done very, very well. It's been redone like three times.

JM: It and the Truman Museum have been recently refreshed.

JC: It's not too long ago, yes.

JM: So, you're saying a lot of the really interesting historical artifacts are in those libraries, right?

JC: That's where it's most accessible. Because what we did with the Rotunda is much better.

JM: I want to talk about that. One of the things, I was reading a biography of yours which is in progress about the Archives, your time at the Archives. One of the things that was mentioned there was a box of some kind that had copies of telegrams that Lincoln had written during the Civil War.

JC: Yes.

JM: There are just fascinating things like that throughout the collection.

JC: One of the neat things we used to do in terms of when we had special guests, particularly members of Congress in the downtown facility where we have the old, old records like ones with Lincoln. We would take them up in the stacks and pull some of those things out.

JM: That would be amazing.

JC: Yes, we have a lot of Lincoln records.

JM: So, you keep talking about the downtown facility. That's the main building of the Archives.

JC: The original one built in the thirties.

JM: Really a magnificent building.

JC: It is. And then with the Clinton administration, we got the money to really update it.

JM: You had another facility where you worked that was in College Park, Maryland.

JC: Yes. It was just being finished when I got there.

JM: But the point is, you thought that the main archive building down in the area of DC with the White House and the Congressional office buildings, and so forth, the Library of Congress, that that really needed some work, and that the documents themselves, the Charters of Freedom—

JC: Yes.

JM: Were starting to deteriorate because of the way they had been stored.

JC: Correct.

JM: So, you had really big things that you had to do in terms of renovating the building and preserving those documents.

JC: That's right. We put a lot of money into it. We're talking about an old set of records that have not been kept [that well and] now you can go to the Rotunda, and they're protected, and they'll be there.

JM: The way they were displayed at the time of your arrival were these big cases mainly built for their security, not for their preservation.

JC: That's correct. Security was emphasized, but not preservation.

JM: In the evening, they would descend through the floor into a vault.

JC: Yes.

JM: Even that process—

JC: That movement was not good from a preservation point of view, not that I knew that, but I learned it.

JM: You had to consult with experts on how better to do this.

JC: Yes.

JM: How to build display cases that were more geared towards preserving the documents.

JC: Yes.

JM: And then you changed it. So, now the documents in the cases that they're being stored in pull back into the wall. They don't go down anymore.

JC: Right.

JM: We're getting into a lot of detail there, but you also then, you really renovated the whole surroundings where those documents are kept.

JC: We did two things. One, we wanted their time in the Rotunda because like I said earlier—

JM: The Rotunda is the Archives building, right?

JC: Yes, within the building. It's gotten better and better, displayed some valuable records, so they were learning some things—

JM: While they stood in line.

JC: About leading up to and then following the Bill of Rights some follow-up examples tied back to the Bill of Rights. So, that experience in and of itself. Then we took the outside around that—because we had a new facility at College Park, the downtown facility wasn't as necessary for more records. We had the old, old records, but we took a lot of space and had a lot of great space for really educating people why records were important from an individual point of view just in every aspect because people—we wanted people to understand that it wasn't just for government. Their records—I made reference to the military records, the ones in St. Louis—we wanted to have examples there to point out. We had the original census records as an example and could pull and show records from the presidential libraries from the thirties on. We wanted people to get a better sense of records and their importance and where they fit in.

I think we accomplished a lot, and I've been gone a long time. They've continued and upgraded—it's only in the last year but a whole different presentation and a lot of technology is coming along. I was pleased to see they didn't overdo technology because I want the messages to be there. I might have been a little different, just biased to what we had done in terms of things, but they've continued. I'm very proud.

JM: That is to a large degree your legacy at the Archives. You came in with a vision of wanting it to be more than a record-keeping operation.

JC: Yes.

JM: You wanted to appeal to the public so that they understood the importance of the records that were being kept there, both for their personal lives but also for the nation, and you embarked on that strategic planning process and changed things around to the point when—as I recall, one of the reasons you wanted to do that because that was important also for Congress to understand, so they understood the importance of the agency itself so that when it came time for you to get funding, you had a story to tell.

JC: Absolutely. And we had a better facility to entertain members of Congress. Of course, as it is in all areas, you don't work the entire body. You work the committee in the House and the committee in the Senate, and usually it comes down to one person. I'm going to have to have some help, but he was a senator from Alaska, there a long time.

JM: Stevens?

JC: Yes. Thank you.

JM: Ted Stevens.

JC: Yes, he was fantastic because he was one of the first to move into electronic. I remember having meetings with him, and he'd hear a click. He'd say, "Just a second." He'd turn over to his desk and want to read an email that had just come in. So, he understood.

And on the House side then, we had a Democrat from North Carolina—I'm drawing a blank on his name—he had been there for a while. He was in a leadership position for the Democrats in the House. He was well educated, understood records and why they were important, and he always protected us in the House. He was on the right side.

That's all you needed. Then you would host any and all—we wanted members of Congress to come over and bring maybe a special guest, and we'd give them a little tour and take them up to see one of those Lincoln records and kind of have a personal relationship that was positive and have then those key individuals in each house that would assist us for getting the budget we needed.

JM: There's a story to tell about the process that you had to go through to get the money for the renovation that you did and the money for the preservation of those documents. You enlisted the support of First Lady Hillary Clinton, and she was very helpful to you.

JC: Oh, very, very helpful. The first thing we had to do, it was a building of the thirties, plumbing, electrical, nothing modern. That was going to take a chunk of money, raising private money to do that. It's almost inappropriate to take private money and go in and do something with a federal building. I knew that—I was realistic—getting enough time with Bill. We were friends, so it was Bill and Hillary at the time. I got an appointment with Hillary, and she gave me an hour to explain what I wanted to do, but the building needed to be upgraded.

JM: And your thought was if you could convince Hillary, she would talk to Bill and [John] Podesta, the chief of staff, and get the wheels in motion, right?

JC: Right. Then Franklin—

JM: Raines?

JC: Yes.

JM: He was the director of the Office of Management and Budget.

JC: OMB.

JM: Yes, he didn't like that so much that you—

JC: Oh, he didn't like it at all because I was supposed to go directly to him, and, of course, he would have rejected it obviously.

JM: And you knew that, right?

JC: I knew I had to pull something.

JM: Pull something, okay.

JC: And it was a battle.

JM: He threatened at one point to move the documents.

JC: Yes.

JM: To teach you a lesson.

JC: That's after I won the first battle. He said, "Carlin, okay, but we're going to take the Charters of Freedom to the Smithsonian. I want to get them over there. There are more people that go through the Smithsonian than go through the Archives." I pushed back, and I said, "Well, we have quite a few. They all walk by and see those documents. You take them over to the Smithsonian, and it's going to be one thing [they might see, if you found where they were]."

JM: They'll get lost.

JC: They'll get lost.

JM: Yes.

JC: But it was quite a battle. Podesta was helpful, too. Raines sort of won a little bit at first, and I got acquainted with Podesta. I told him, "I need some help." He said, "Get me about a half a dozen [packets that explain]."

JM: Talking points, reasons, things that you wanted to do.

JC: “Talking points, pictures, plans, and I’ll share them around the White House.” He did that, and that’s when Raines really got mad.

JM: I think these stories about the inner workings of government and the personalities involved, what you had to do, just to accomplish your vision and the money that it required, and you had to raise a lot of that from private sources through the Foundation.

JC: Everything we did with the building in terms of—

JM: The educational experience, essentially.

JC: Yes, the educational, the museum side. We had to raise all the funds.

JM: So, you got government money to fix the plumbing, etc., and then you had to go to the Foundation to do the other.

JC: Which, Jim, was also an interesting [challenge]. I had not raised a lot of money, really.

JM: To be fair, when you were governor, it didn’t take as much money to run a campaign as it does today.

JC: No. Then, of course, the laws, when I helped Clinton, it was federally funded, and we had to raise a little bit of money to qualify for the federal funds for Kansas and so forth. Sometimes, you’re just lucky. Tom Wheeler called up and said that one of Jimmy Carter’s—

JM: Tom was on your board, but who was he?

JC: I can’t remember the company he ran. He was big time. A big shot.

JM: A big shot on your board.

JC: A big shot, but he was very helpful. He was plugged in and was really helpful. He said—I’m forgetting his name. He was in the Carter administration, was on the White House staff, one of the Georgia Mafia, was going to be in town, and it ought to be interesting just to have lunch with him.

JM: Not Hodding Carter.

JC: No, if you said it, I’d tell you. It wasn’t one of the ones—he was kind of important but not focused on and didn’t get in as much trouble as some of the others. Anyway, we were just having lunch, and we were talking about what we were doing. We’re looking for money, obviously. “If you have any ideas, we’d love to hear them.” And he thought a little bit, and he said, “I’m working with a family in Chicago. They might be interested.” I’d shared specifics. I said, “We

want to put a theatre in. We want to show documentary films. We want to have a place to have some opportunity to further advance—Charlie Guggenheim’s [films] that got an Oscar.”

So, we established the practice after we had that theatre. We showed the candidates for the small film competition for the Oscars.

JM: Really?

JC: Yes.

JM: So, the short film candidates who were up for Oscars, you showed those films.

JC: Yes. Now we showed them after the Oscar competition.

JM: Yes, which still people got to see the whole collection that had been nominated.

JC: They got to see the whole collection. Now you’re going to have to help me. How the hell did I get so far off the track here?

JM: I think I led you astray. It’s easy to do when you talk to me. Some of these details about the inner workings, I’m just fascinated by how it works.

JC: Anyway, back to the conversation at lunch.

JM: Yes, there we go.

JC: My friend said, “How much money do you need to build that theatre?” We had never talked about—

JM: You just pulled a number out of your back pocket, so to speak.

JC: I said five million dollars. He said, “I think I can get it for you.”

JM: That turned out to be about right, didn’t it? How did you come up with that number?

JC: Total luck. I knew I had to make it big. The family’s name is on that, the McGowan Theatre.

JM: If you look back over your almost ten years at the Archives, what are you proudest of? Do you credit yourself with literally bringing that agency to the 21st century? Is that what you think you accomplished?

JC: I think I had basic skills and experiences when I got there, and then they put a team together that got the work done.

JM: I didn’t mean to ask the question in terms of you crediting yourself, but your leadership. It was an agency that wasn’t—

JC: Very few things are done successfully at the local, state, and federal level without somebody at the top that understands what the leader's role is, and then with a team, things get done.

JM: You get the team to buy in, and then you're off to the races.

JC: Right, because the team represents different aspects of the agency, different particular skills, and you've got to mold them together for a bigger look at what we need to do to accomplish the goals we want to achieve.

JM: I remember an anecdote from the book that I think is important to help people understand your style of leadership because there are various styles, some more effective than others. You keep referring to the team you brought in, and that style goes back to your time as governor as we discussed earlier. But early in your tenure at the Archives, you were kind of a listen more than you talk mode, but you had a situation where you had to—there was somebody who essentially you had to discipline. I remember the anecdote. A lot of what's in this book, you wrote in your diary. You think you came on a little too strong. You didn't handle it well. And in your diary, you said, "I need to do better." That is kind of your leadership style. You do work pretty hard at getting team buy-in to your vision. Am I correct in that?

JC: Absolutely, because it's a team that's going to in the end make it happen. As the leader, I can't do it. I can provide leadership, decisions, help them get in a position where they work together and establish a common goal, sign off on it so it has my—as the archivist, this is what we're going to do, but none of that would have happened without the team.

JM: You note in the diary about not handling this particular situation when it came to a job evaluation or something very well. I think you said, "No damage done, but I need to do better." You were worried about losing the team and not getting that buy-in for the vision.

JC: I established—every night at the end of the day, there's a box that thick of—

JM: Your diary entries?

JC: Yes. It's in the room right across from where we are.

JM: It's not in the Archives? It should be there. It should be right up there with the Lincoln stuff.

JC: Well, it will be there someday, but I wanted it—I don't know if it's technically a federal record. I mean, they were just my notes, but they'll be valuable. There's no question about that. Then I had an interesting experience because John Glenn, my friend, decided that all small agencies needed an inspector general.

JM: Former astronaut, US senator from Ohio, presidential candidate. You endorsed him for president, and you were friends.

JC: That's right. And one of his achievements as senator from Ohio was to get inspector generals down to small agencies like the Archives. The one I inherited was leaving. I had to hire—finally a young man I got excited about and he was talented, but the problem was, and I didn't realize it until a few years in living through hell that I should have brought in an older person that was ready, would do a good job, but wasn't ambitious. We didn't do a lot that the inspector general could catch. We didn't handle a lot of loose change, really, in a gift store.

JM: There wasn't a lot of opportunity for malfeasance.

JC: So, he was determined to get rid of me.

JM: Why? Personal reasons? He wanted to make his mark?

JC: One of my best staff, a young woman, clearly a lesbian, traveled with me quite a bit. For some reason, he got in his head I was having some kind of an affair. He made a case out of it. We had to hire a lawyer to defend us because he was—

JM: He was determined.

JC: He was determined to get rid of me because he wanted to move up. He wanted to have a record.

JM: Was this late in your tenure there?

JC: No, unfortunately, maybe the second or third year.

JM: Oh, boy, you had that to deal with.

JC: I dealt with it for several years, but I survived. It didn't stop or interfere, but he made our personal life kind of complicated and a little bit expensive because I had to hire a lawyer to deal with it.

JM: You always had an ability to compartmentalize things and stay on task. One of the anecdotes in the book was right when you were at the outset of this very intensive strategic planning process, your mother died.

JC: Yes.

JM: And you had to get back home. You were right back at work as soon as you could get there.

JC: That was very early.

JM: But it was hard. Speaking of inspectors general, it's pretty well-known coming up to contemporary times that there are a lot of empty inspector general posts throughout the federal government these days because the Trump administration didn't see the need for them. What's going on with the Archives right now? I know that, as we mentioned, when you were first

nominated, there were concerns that you might be too partisan or too political, and then when President Trump took office, one of the first things that they did was the president dismissed Colleen Shogan who was the archivist at the time. For one thing, I don't understand how the president can simply dismiss her. They have to go to Congress and give a reason. Maybe they did that.

JC: I went through the process myself. I remember when W. Bush came in. One of his staff called up and just said, "We expect you to resign."

JM: I'm glad you brought that up. Soon after he took office, you were notified that they wanted to replace you.

JC: Yes. I said, "You can, but it's written right in the law, you've got to go to Congress and explain why you want to make the change."

JM: Because you didn't want to go.

JC: Of course, I didn't want to go. I was in the middle of making real progress. So, they bought it for a while but eventually got me.

JM: You negotiated with them and said, "When you decide who you really want in this job and you get through the confirmation process, once that person is confirmed, I'll resign." It turned out that took almost two years.

JC: Yes.

JM: Is that how it happened?

JC: Well, [Alberto] Gonzales is the one I dealt with.

JM: He was the attorney general.

JC: The attorney general. I remember he called me and he said, "There's concerns. They'd like to make a change." I said, "You're the attorney general. You should understand the process."

JM: But this was months after they first indicated—months passed before he—

JC: Yes. I stalled it for a long time, but finally he came—and then he got back with me and he said, "It's going to be rough. I just want to warn you. This is going to be rough for you." But the interesting thing on the story was, it turned out he wanted his neighbor to have the job. Of course, he only lasted a few years, and then the FBI took him out because he was inappropriately dealing with female staff.

JM: This is Gonzales?

JC: [Allen] Weinstein was. I came within a few months of getting the ten years I wanted. I got things to where I felt like I was comfortable. It was not in the end a problem.

JM: I just want to make sure we're clear on this point. The person who was Gonzales's friend who he wanted to give the job only lasted a couple of years once he was in the job.

JC: I think it was three or four years.

JM: He was your successor.

JC: Yes.

JM: So, it was clear. The Bush administration indicated they wanted to replace you. Then months passed, and they came back at you, and you negotiated kind of an exit strategy. So, you were the archivist of the United States almost ten years.

JC: Almost ten years, just short three months.

JM: Are you keeping track of what's going on there today?

JC: To some degree. You mentioned about Shogan getting fired. I was very nervous at the time, what was going to happen. As far as I know, things have worked pretty well. The only controversy we have with the current administration—I shouldn't say "we"—they have now are all those classified records that he took, totally breaking the law. You just don't walk out with records, even if you're President of the United States, particularly classified records.

JM: To explain to people, a lot of presidents did take stuff with them, but after Watergate—

JC: Watergate changed things.

JM: Congress passed a law, the Presidential Records Act, that specified very clearly what were public documents and what were not. That was the issue with the documents that President Trump took to Mar-a-Lago after his first term.

JC: Prior to FDR, presidents gave them to the local library at home.

JM: They were all personal papers, yes.

JC: And probably sort of got what they thought was the good stuff.

JM: Those documents [at Mar-a-Lago] were all eventually returned, weren't they?

JC: No, still not. It hasn't been resolved. Obviously, the existing Archives, they're not opening up anything that might come back to bite them. That will not be resolved probably until after his administration.

JM: Until he leaves office, okay. Well, it's been a pleasure talking to you about this. It's been fascinating.

JC: I don't know how many times you've interviewed me over decades, but—

JM: A lot.

JC: Several times.

JM: I tell the story over and over again, it's one of my favorite stories, and I'll just add it to this interview. It's a little bit out of context, but I remember scheduling an interview with you when I was working for the public radio station, Kansas Public Radio. It was going to be a live interview early, early in the morning. I knew you were a dairy farmer. I knew you weren't adverse to getting up early. So, we scheduled the interview, and it snowed heavily the night before. You're still driving, trying to get to the interview. I think it's at 5:00 something in the morning. Your car gets stuck, and you get out and literally jog the last couple of blocks and come pounding up the stairs. I'm essentially biding my time live on the air because you aren't there yet, but you show up. I can't imagine a circumstance today where a governor would go to that much trouble.

JC: There were benefits from getting up at 5:30 every morning to milk cows 365 days a year.

JM: It sounds like you took a lot of what you learned on the farm and in farm programs, 4-H programs at K-State, that those helped you through your entire career.

JC: There are some basic skills that are important regardless of what field you go into. I was fortunate to be in the family I had. Milking cows, you learn discipline. Like I told the committee that was reviewing my nomination, I dealt with records from the day I started in 4-H—production records, the official breeding records, and then just the discipline and so forth that went with it. As I made reference, the judging teams, I on reflection, they probably did more to put me in a position where I could do what I did.

JM: Thanks for bringing the conversation back to the topic at hand after I diverted it. Thanks a lot, John.

JC: Thank you.

[End of File]