
**Oral Interview with Harry C. O'Haver, Assistant Chief, Processing Systems Branch, August 31, 2017**

**Sharon Tosi Lacy:** Thank you, Mr. O'Haver, for agreeing to sit down with us as we get this oral history. My name is Sharon Tosi Lacey, I'm the Chief Historian. And I'm just going to start out asking a few questions to give us a little bit about your background.

**Harry O'Haver:** Certainly.

**Lacey:** And then we can get into what you did here at the Census Bureau. So why don't you tell me a little bit about your childhood, your education, and how you came to work at the Census Bureau originally.

**O'Haver:** Well, I was born in New York City, moved to Detroit, Michigan when I was four, and lived in Detroit and grew up with my parents and worked in Detroit until the high school era began. I went to Detroit Catholic Central under the Basilian Fathers. And when I got out, as many young men did, I was eager to go to college, but my parents couldn't afford it. And so I went to work. I did the things a younger does, worked in a gas station and so forth. When I saw no future in that, I enlisted in the U.S. Navy—my dad was a World War II Navy veteran. Then I had an opportunity to take a test for the Naval Reserve Training Corps. I passed it and got a free college education at the University of New Mexico as a statistician. I was a mathematician by desire. And from there, I served in the Navy as a Commission Officer. And then, when I became a civilian again, we were in a recession and there wasn't any work.

**Lacey:** What year was this, that you got out of the Navy?

**O'Haver:** This was around late 1953, early 1954. And so I answered an ad in the Detroit Free Press that said they were looking for enumerators to take a business survey and to contact the local office of the Bureau of the Census, which I did. And there was a gentleman named John [E.] Tharaldson, who was the regional director of that office, and he hired me

as an enumerator. I started as an enumerator, and then after a few weeks, apparently they saw something in me, and they made me a crew leader. When I finished up the job in Detroit, I still didn't have any work, but the regional director in Chicago, Ted [Theodore F.] Olson, asked if I would come down and close out his operation. And I did that.

**Lacey:** Which survey was this? Was this the economic survey?

**O'Haver:** It was the annual economic census. While I was there, he [Olson] asked me if I wanted to take a test for permanent employment. I think it was called the FSEE, Federal Service Entrance Exam. And I did, apparently passed it, and I was offered a GS5, which I took. Mr. Olson wanted me to work in Chicago but I wanted to work back where my folks were, and he never forgave me for that, but I went back to Detroit and served in many capacities. I did a lot of economic survey work. I drove all over the state of Michigan doing surveys with Gerber baby food and other companies. And of course, got involved in CPS.

**Lacey:** What does CPS stand for?

**O'Haver:** Consumer Pricing Survey. I supervised that for a while, and then the labor survey.

**Lacey:** And what years were those that you overall those?

**O'Haver:** I would say I came to the Bureau in 1956, as a full-time employee, and that was for about three years. And I remember that because in 1959, I met my future wife in Muskegon, Michigan, and at the same time I had applied for a civil service internship and was accepted. So we got married, and three days later, we were in Washington. Had to skip the honeymoon. So I came to Washington and worked in the field division, that was one of my internships. Another one was in forms design, which has been one of my favorite things ever since. And when that period was over, the Census Bureau and the field division decided that's where I should be, and that's where I was. And I was there until -- well, after the census of 1960, I actually was starting into decennial census work and I ran a district office in Evansville, Indiana. And when the census was over, I came back to Washington. They decided I needed more seasoning, so they sent me to Philadelphia (Pennsylvania) to the regional office. I ran the national health survey for them and did my turn in all the re-interview and other activities

at our regional office. And then they brought me back to Washington and gave me a branch, but didn't give me the promotion to go with it. And now today the job is a GS-14-- I had to take it as a [GS]13 because they could only bump me one level, and I was a [GS]12 in Philadelphia.[1]

**Lacey:** Which branch did they give you?

**O'Haver:** It was the decennial census operations branch. And that was the branch with the responsibility for designing the collection procedures for the 1970 census, which was the first mail-out mail-back census, and a very big jump for the Bureau. I took on that job and in doing it had some really interesting experiences. I ran two tests censuses, one in Louisville, Kentucky, and one in Cleveland, Ohio. If I remember correctly, the Perry Payne building in Cleveland. They worked out well and resulted in procedure used in the census. The census was very successful in 1970, beyond what they thought it would be. I think that the mail response rate was around 86%, just phenomenal for the first time. And during that time in the test office and also back in Washington (DC), I met many Canadians from Statistics Canada, and we began to develop a strong relationship, which the Bureau wanted as well. It became so strong that they persuaded the Bureau of Census that they needed me to come down, or up really, to Canada and to help do the same thing in their census. So the Bureau agreed to it, and I went there. Moved to Ottawa (Canada), actually had a house built and was the director of the field operations.

**Lacey:** For the Canadian census?

**O'Haver:** Yes and also the many surveys such as labor, health, etcetera. I had eight regional offices spread across the country. And they got me to come to Canada and, without my asking for it, they jumped me two levels, made me what they called an SX1, senior executive 1. Which is equivalent now I think to SES-1 here in the United States.[2]

**Lacey:** Were you still a Census Bureau employee?

**O'Haver:** No. I actually resigned from the Bureau but reserved all my retirement benefits. And went there with the idea I would return, which I eventually

[1] General Schedule (GS) refers to the pay scale within the United States civil service
[2] Senior Executive Service (SES) are the key government executive personnel that oversee the government workforce

did. But in Canada, I had the job of bringing forth all the information from the Bureau. I had the pleasure of holding the first international meeting of regional directors, at a place called Estérel in Quebec, where everybody got to meet each other for the first time and share information.

**Lacey:** You say it was international. So you had American regional offices coming too?

**O'Haver:** Directors came up, all 13 of them came to the meeting in Canada, plus senior officials. Jefferson [D.] McPike was then the chief of the field division in the United States who I had worked for. And so it was a wonderful exchange and still goes on today, I hope. I don't think it's the same as it was then because structure has changed. But about then my wife began to explain to me that she didn't like 20 degrees below zero at night in the winter, and we eventually came back to the United States, and I worked with a gentleman named Jim [James S.] Werking. He and I did the processing of the 1980 census, which was an area that was brand-new to me. But I had a lot of the field experience and the general experience in Canada. And so we were able to put together three remote processing offices. One was in the regular census processing office.

**Lacey:** Where was that?

**O'Haver:** Across the river from Louisville in Indiana.

**Lacey:** In Jeffersonville?

**O'Haver:** Yeah, Jeffersonville. And then we had another processing office at the Ziggurat, which was a building in, I think it was Laguna Niguel in California, and another one in New Orleans (Louisiana). We put together a scheme for bringing in all the paper and storing it and running a quality control system, and using Tony [Anthony A.] Berlinsky's (Chief, Machine Development Laboratories) famous machine, which optical device for input to computer, to collect the data and transmit it to Washington where it was picked up on direct transmission from mini-computers in the three sites.[3] That was a first. I had the pleasure of being given the responsibility to find a company that could run those mini-computers on the site as well as someone who would come to Washington to work directly with us. I visited all the big computer companies, and they weren't overly interested.

[3] FOSDIC—Film Optical Sensing Device for Input to Computers.

They were doing other things. I found a little tiny company in Columbus, Ohio, named CompuServe. They were so small that in order to impress me, they rented a Mercedes to pick me up at the airport. They didn't think I'd walk around to the back of the car, which I did. And I remember that in their test unit, their backup battery supply was not the normal UPS, but it was 24 Excide 12-volt car batteries. So they impressed me so much with their youth and their energy and their technical knowledge, that we hired them, and they eventually turned out to be a pretty good sized company. That was a pleasure. And that was pretty much the end of my career. We finished the census and it was a great success. I was at that point where I was ready to retire, or I thought I was, and so I applied for early retirement. In those days they were glad to do it.

**Lacey:** Was this 1981?

**O'Haver:** Actually it was 1982, early '82. So I went home and got bored playing golf, and decided to get into security locks. I'm currently 86 years old, and I still run my own corporation, which is in industrial security locking systems. And our specialty is SCIFs (Sensitive Compartmented Information Facility). And we do the acoustical doors for SCIFs for many federal agencies in the Washington area.

**Lacey:** I worked in one in the Pentagon, one of your SCIFs.

**O'Haver:** There you go. So it keeps my brain going and my legs going, and so I'm still going. I really enjoy being here today and seeing the Bureau as it's morphed into something much different but amazingly progressive in terms of what it's done to achieve the objectives the Bureau had, which is collecting, processing, and making available data on a massive scale.

**Lacey:** I'd like to dig a little deeper into some of the bigger projects. So you worked on three censuses, '60, '70, and '80.

**O'Haver:** And two in Canada, so in total I was involved in five censuses.

**Lacey:** So five censuses. Can you talk a little bit about some of the differences? I know the mail-out and mail-back was a huge difference for 1970. Can you talk a little bit about implementing that, some of the challenges and successes you had with that?

**O'Haver:** Yes. That was the age of Morris [H.] Hansen (Assistant Director for Research and Development), who was one of the great geniuses the Bureau had, and Jimmy [James L] McPherson (Machine Development Officer), Hal [Harold] Nisselson (Chief Mathematical and Statistical Advisor), all of the brain power that decided to move the Bureau into a new era. I was very fortunate to be in the position I was in with the field division so that I was able to participate with them. The problems were massive. The interaction with the post office and the geography division, trying to develop mapping, which would enable us to get addresses which we could mail to with a high rate of success. That worked. Then in the test censuses we actually tried these methodologies and they worked. And so the decision was made that this is the way we were going to go, and it worked very well. In 1970, the mail-back percentage was in excess of 86%, which was well above our expectations. And the Bureau has progressed from there. In fact, when I first joined the Bureau, it was interviewers going house to house and filling out forms and then all the forms went to Washington where people on a keyboard translated them into punch cards and then onto giant servers. And in those days, none of us, even at the senior levels, were allowed to touch a keyboard. There weren't any keyboards on desks to touch. They were all in one place. And the punching of cards and converting the holes data methodology was going on. And then Tony Berlinsky invented FOSDIC, and little circles could be filled in and the data could be collected and transmitted with a high degree of quality. And it moved from there onto where it is today, which, as I understand it, it is going to be interviewers doing non-response followups going to a house and doing the interviews on handheld pads or whatever devices. And that information then will go directly into the databases and be available. Which is brilliant and wonderful. Of course, our society today is a more difficult society to collect data from. The Bureau, I think, is moving in the right direction doing it this way, making it as easy as they can make it for the population and still maintain reliability, accuracy, and breadth of data.

**Lacey:** Can you talk a little bit about the differences that saw you between doing the American censuses and doing the Canadian census?

**O'Haver:** Yes. There were some significant differences. Our regional directors in the United States were very much decentralized. Whereas in, in Canada, they weren't. So one of my jobs was to teach them what decentralization meant and the advantages of it. They [regional offices] didn't even draft their

budgets. Their budgets were made in what we called “head office” in Ottawa and then sent to them. And I taught them how to do their own so that they could see the benefits of understanding and managing and using the money in the best possible way. That was a major change. Being an American in Canada at that level was not easy for anybody, including the Canadians. They had 21 million people compared to our 250 million. The geographic spread of Canada is actually comparable to the size of the United States. But the amount of large cities, Toronto and Vancouver were two of the large cities, and these were both regional offices. But then you got down to Halifax, Nova Scotia, and St. John's, Newfoundland, both smaller cities, and we actually had a regional office in Ottawa. We never had a regional office in Washington [DC]. So there were many differences in the attitudes of the data collection organization. But I brought my experience from the United States to Canada and it was welcomed, which was a wonderful thing. And as a matter of fact, in their first mail back census they exceeded our response rate. They got 88%. And that to some extent was due to the fact that we used the US experience and used it to modify the Canadian experiment. But Canada was not the same. People think Ottawa, Canada, the nation's capital is a nice warm place and we experienced temperatures up to 30 degrees below zero at night in the wintertime.

**Lacey:** You had a lot more frontier places to get to?

**O’Haver:** A lot more frontier places, and some could be very dangerous. You had to bring along a big hockey bag with all the clothing in case the car quit, because you wouldn't live long enough to walk to safety and there were, of course, no cell phones in those days.[4] So that was exciting. And I got a chance to play golf in the part of Edmonton (Alberta) where there was no darkness at night. It was constantly light for three months. And of course, Vancouver and Vancouver Island, and St. John's, Newfoundland were wonderful places to go. So I, you know, my family loved it and I loved the work, and thoroughly enjoyed the people who were extremely friendly. And the Census people in Canada were capable people just like those in the United States.

(Pause while Mr. O’Haver posed for photos for *CounterParts*)

[4] Enumerators regularly carried snowmobile suits, boots, hats, facemasks, gloves, etc.

**Lacey:** Hi. We're here with back with Mr. Harry O'Haver, a former employee of the Census Bureau. And we were talking about the 1970 census and about the challenges faced by the geography division with mail-out mail-back.

**O'Haver:** It was quite a job that geography was given, and that was to produce maps that enumerators could use prior to the census to go out and do an operation called "listing." Actually it involved listing the mailing addresses of all the houses in a block, in a tract, and eventually into the all the SMSAs (Standard Metropolitan Statistical Area) so that the data that was coming in, all this had to go out as a form, and that required an address. And this was more than interesting. As a matter of fact, I got into it very deeply because that was one of my jobs. And I went out with members of my branch to Athens, Ohio, and conducted a training session for the enumerators who would be going house to house and recording the mailing addresses. Developing a training course, training them, and then measuring their success by visiting the blocks ourselves and seeing just how accurately they were able to do it, and then going to the local post office to see were these valid mailing addresses that something could be mailed to was absolutely fascinating. Then going back and working with geography division and making this into a national program where those mailing addresses that they had that they had given to the Bureau was supplemented by the on-the-ground information and merged together into one highly-accurate list for getting the forms to the people so they could fill them out and mail them back.

**Lacey:** How did you handle rural areas that might not have mail addresses, where people were using PO (post office) boxes and so forth?

**O'Haver:** The post office was instrumental in solving those problems, because they faced the same dilemma daily. They had staff who would drive around. In those days they didn't have the little vehicles we see on the road today. Many of them just had cars. But they had to drive around and put the mail in a mailbox which was at the roadside of perhaps a mile-and-a-half driveway up to a single house. And those people got the census forms as well, but of course, it cost a lot more to mail it to them. There was a much higher nonresponse rate for those people because the bother of sometimes getting help to fill out the information, particularly if they were picked as a long form responder, it was not something they wanted to do. So they wound up seeing an enumerator somewhere in the chain that would do the interview.

**Lacey:** And what was the overall response rate for the 1970 census? I know you said it was over 86% for the mail-in mail back. What was our undercount that year, do you know?

**O'Haver:** The best information I can dredge up out of my memory was that the point where enumerators began personal follow-up was about 14%. The final nonresponse rate was about 4%.[5] Which was quite extraordinary. That required, of course, a lot of onsite follow up. Some of the follow up actually was tested in those days by telephone just to see if they could resolve problems over the phone. And nonresponse was due to many things. People weren't home. The family had a problem they didn't want to expose. Criminals, of course, tended not to respond. But in the end, you had to get the best information you could that could be statistically reliable and detailed. And in the end, the Bureau did that very well, better, as I recall, than they had done with previous technologies.

**Lacey:** What were some differences -- you left in between the 1970 and you came back for the 1980 census. What were some differences that you saw with how they approached the 1980 census, now that you've proven the success of mail-out mail-back?

**O'Haver:** The biggest change was the establishment of three data processing centers. Using the centers enabled all of the paperwork for 1/3 of the country to go to each of these processing centers to be filed in massive steel racks, to be clearly identified with barcodes, to be put through an intensive quality assurance program. As a matter of fact, one of the innovations we came up with which was rather interesting, was bar codes. Bar codes were put on the boxes that contained the census forms so that the quality control process could relate back to not only where these forms came from on the steel racks, but also where they came from nationally. And that, believe it or not, worked very well.[6]

**Lacey:** Now, if someone sent back a form incomplete, did you have a process for when it went through the machines, did it recognize if a form was incomplete? Or did that have to be gone through by hand?

[5] Estimated undercount was actually 2.7%

[6] Mr. O'Haver added later that this also helped track each box of forms through all the steps in the quality assurance program.

**O'Haver:** It actually did give that information. In the quality assurance system, those documents which met the parameters of the system were transmitted to headquarters in Washington and became part of the data. Those that did not pass were automatically put through follow-up procedures in the three processing sites. Where they still didn't pass, they went back to the individual district offices. And in those offices, follow up was done to the level of an interviewer going out and knocking on the door.

**Lacey:** Can you talk a little bit about some of the people who mentored you or influenced you here during your time at the Census Bureau?

**O'Haver:** Oh, yes, there were some great names in those days. Jefferson Mc Pike was chief of the field division. And I remember George [K.] Klink (Chief, Demographic Program Branch) was an assistant chief and my mentor when I came to Washington (DC) under the civil service intern program. He took me through my first educational process on what SMSAs and tracks and blocks were. I did work in the geography division under the field division control, and that was a big step up in my educational process. Then, of course, there were the greats, Morris Hansen and Jimmy McPherson and Hal Nisselson. The people that really created these innovations and moved them forward and supported by many, many people. Dean Weber (Supervisory Mathematical Statistician) was a name from the past who was my personal mentor when I was the branch chief and doing the design work for the data collection. And as a matter of fact, one story I didn't tell you, which is kind of interesting, is one of the problems that they had in establishing the district offices across the country. And there would be normally 450 to 500, was the furniture. And the furniture was stored by GSA in decentralized locations and was shipped out to the district offices. The old double desks from military days when sergeants sat facing each other, and all this kind of furniture, had to be moved in. It was never really conducive to good organization and management at the district level. So a gentleman that worked for me in my branch, Bob Roundtree, and I had an idea. Why can't we have fireproof cardboard furniture? And so we worked with a company called Red Rope, I don't know if they're in business today or not. And they worked with us in developing desks, including stenographic desks, file cabinets, and all sorts of furniture of every description.

**Lacey:** All made out of cardboard?

**O'Haver:** Made out of cardboard, which was totally fireproof. So at the end of the census, instead of shipping it back to a storage center, we gave them to the local schools and churches and so forth, who made use of them. And we bought folding chairs, and we gave those as well. So as I recall, there was about an $11 million savings. I was introduced for the first time to one of the Bureau rules, which is if you're above grade 13, the rules for getting certificates and particularly money awards were different. So when the $10,000, maybe it was $5000 ,reward was declared with a special plaque, I had to give it to Bob Roundtree because I was too high in the GS food chain to get it, and I remember that. But I did get something. The Washington Post published a picture and I've been searching for it and haven't found it yet, of Bob and I standing on one of the tables. And the two of us together at that time probably weighed a total of pretty close to 500 pounds.

**Lacey:** We have one of them, the head of field division [Timothy Olson] has one in his office.

**O'Haver:** Isn't that amazing?

**Lacey:** Yes. And he was demonstrating to us how you could sit on it and it held. In the 1990s, it was able to hold a computer and everything. The only thing that seemed to be the Achilles' heel was water. They had one field office where the sprinklers went off.

**O'Haver:** Cardboard doesn't react well to water, and they were not waterproof.

**Lacey:** But they were fireproof.

**O'Haver:** They were indeed. Not fire resistant but fireproof. That's interesting to find out one of them still exists.

**Lacey:** Yes, we still have one. So can you talk a little bit about what you consider was your favorite project that you worked on? You talked a little bit about forms. Do you enjoy forms design and so forth?

**O'Haver:** I enjoyed forms design at that time because I knew nothing about it. I enjoyed it even more when I was able to apply it to the design work that I was involved in in both countries. Because when you can speak somebody's language and you can point out why you should make this

bigger, because when you fill it in with the data you have, there won't be enough room. And how to structure a form so it was self-instructing and so forth, those proved very valuable and still do in the little business I run now. Where we do all our own forms and marketing information and so forth, and that all came from my training at the Bureau. So I've always held that close to my heart. Of course, the greatest pleasure I had was being involved in the national censuses.

**Lacey:** Do you have any other story? Like when you tell your memories of the censuses, what's your go-to story?

**O'Haver:** Working with Katherine [G. Parker] Capt (Survey Statistician and wife of Census Director James Clyde Capt (1941-49)), when I was first at the Bureau was a joy. My first assignment was the national health survey. A group of us juniors were picked by Katherine because she had the same view I had later on: the value of youth and the new ideas they brought to the job. So we joined her in developing, she developed and we did the work, on the national health survey, and particularly the health examination surveys.

**Lacey:** What year would this have been?

**O'Haver:** This would have been 1960, the early part -- well, after the 1960 census, after June of '60. And we worked developing this and went to the health examination surveys. And I had two jobs, I was part of her team representing the field division of the Bureau and I also was the only one that held a federal license for an 18-wheel tractor-trailer, so I could help them move the health examination trailers around where they belonged, do it legally and without crushing them. So that was a really interesting experience. And Katherine's who sister was a well-known national golfer. So we went with Katherine on a train called the *Nancy Hanks* and I got the privilege of playing golf with her sister and barely beat her she was so good. And as I recall, I had to shoot four under par that day to beat her. That was really stretching my ability to the maximum. But those were some of the things that stick in my mind. I remember when I knew Katherine was retiring from the Bureau--her husband at one time was director. And I was fortunate enough to call her at her going-away party and wish her well. That perhaps is one of the really high spots of my career.

**Lacey:** In hindsight, were there any decisions or programs that you were involved in that you would have done differently looking back?

**O'Haver:** I think all of them. In hindsight, we all find out our mistakes. But they're part of the learning process. And so in a way, you have to call them part of the doing process, because you only learn, really learn, from the doing and the results. And I think part of management itself is the learning process and giving your people the opportunity to participate in that process. And that's one of the biggest jobs a manager has, is to utilize the skills of his people so not only do they contribute to what they're doing, but they fall in love with what they're doing and their value to the organization themselves increases dramatically.

**Lacey:** And finally, did you view the Census Bureau as having a particular culture? And if so, did you find that what you did fit in that culture? Or did you try to challenge or change that Census Bureau culture?

**O'Haver:** I don't think I ever tried to change the culture. I was very proud of the Bureau obsession with quality and ethics. Political Pressure was part of our daily life. The Census Bureau was an organization which was recognized as not only very high quality in what it did, and very progressive in what it had planned to do, but it was also an organization that was very hard to push around. And I was involved in the preparation for the negotiations with Mayor [Edward I.] Koch in New York City (New York) when he was trying to get data from a special census changed to a higher number because it meant federal funds. And the negotiations the Bureau had with him was to focus on the policy that that the Bureau of the Census could not be persuaded politically to give away the thing it was proudest of, and that is the accuracy of its data. It produced the true data, and there it is and use it as you wish. I'm quite sure we spent a lot of government money on checking and rechecking and doing extensive follow-up in New York City to get the highest numbers that we could legitimately get. But in the end, he [Mayor Koch] learned and he became a real fan of the Bureau of the Census in the future and spoke highly of the Bureau.

**Lacey:** In conclusion, do you have any parting words, memories, advice you would like to give?

**O’Haver:** I really don't. I think the Bureau has progressed faster and in the right direction 95% of the time. The Bureau was under certain pressures, which all federal agencies are. You don't like to reduce you're A-budget because you want to get back at least what you had last year. You know, your budget, you always have some programs you'd like to add, all that. That part of it was not the most pleasant part of all. But the learning, the ability to see what the results were and of the new things the Bureau did, that was a great pleasure to me and still is, to be part of that. Instead of just getting rich or becoming important. To be able to say, I was there when the first mail-out mail-back census was ever done is something that I carry with me every day.

**Lacey:** Thank you very much for your time. It's been a pleasure talking with you. We really appreciate you sharing your memories and your knowledge with us today.

**O’Haver:** My pleasure too.