

NASA JOHNSON SPACE CENTER ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

ORAL HISTORY TRANSCRIPT

NANCY L. FEE
INTERVIEWED BY REBECCA WRIGHT
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WRIGHT: Today is November 29, 2011. This oral history interview is being conducted with Nancy Fee in Houston, Texas, for the NASA Johnson Space Center Oral History Project. Interviewer is Rebecca Wright. I really appreciate you finding time for this interview. I know you only have a day and a half left here at the Center [before you retire] after 45 years.

We are in Building 37 where I understand you spent most of your time. Tell me how you first started with the Manned Spacecraft Center [original name of JSC from 1961 to 1973] and about some of your first jobs.

FEE: My aunt was a procurement officer. I was going to go to Lamar Tech [Lamar Institute of Technology, Beaumont, Texas]. I had finished my senior year of high school and I had already visited Lamar Tech, knew what field I wanted to get into.

I missed the opportunity for a summer job, so my aunt says, “Well, don’t worry about it, just apply for the full-time job. If you get it, when the time to start college comes up, you can just resign.” Needless to say since that was the 1960s, I was making pretty good money as a secretary-stenographer—that’s what the position was called then. Unless a woman wanted to become a teacher or a secretary or a nurse, there were not many opportunities for women. I was told, “You’re not going to get your job as an engineer.” That was disillusioning, and I thought, “Well, maybe they’re right.” So I stayed here, especially since I started off working in the Engineering Directorate.

We were located at Ellington [Air Force Base, Houston, Texas]. I was going nowhere in that job in the engineering area, and I decided I wanted a change. The woman that gave me my test and hired me, Mary Duckett, then Wilmarth, arranged for me to get an interview. She moved me to what was the Medical Directorate. At the time, the Center had the Science Directorate and the Medical Directorate. That was in early '69, and I moved to Building 37. And here I am 45 years later, in Building 37. I've moved four times. I think that was the best move that I ever made, because even though you were a secretary, they gave you more opportunities and allowed you to do more than just plain secretarial work.

Secretarial work was grueling at the time, because we used nonelectric typewriters, noncomputers, but everything had to be letter perfect. In that day the secretarial field was tough. It was very strict, there were adamant rules and procedures and you had to stick with them. For example, everybody had to have all these different-colored carbon copies, so if you made a little typo you were erasing for the rest of the day. But I got to work with a bunch of interesting people—science, medical; they had the animal lab, had fish, various research labs, the Health Stabilization Program. They had microbiology, virology. Gee, there were so many. This building was inundated with more labs than what it presently has now, because a lot of them they've combined.

WRIGHT: You mentioned that you felt like you wouldn't be able to do engineering like you had wanted. Was that something you'd wanted to study at Lamar, to go into an engineering field?

FEE: I wanted to be an electrical engineer; I liked to tinker with that kind of stuff. That was why I had gone on the tour and got the list of classes.

WRIGHT: When you transferred over to Building 37 with all of the medical and life sciences, did you find that this was a new interest for you, something you were interested in learning?

FEE: It was. NASA gave me every opportunity to take every class possible there was, all the training things that came out. I took everything, even if it wasn't in my field. If they approved it, I went to it. I was able to broaden my background and learn more than just the secretarial field, instead of just staying there. That was going to be my future growth. I took interest. I was on the Federal Women's Program Committee for several years, I was an Equal Employment Opportunity counselor for several years. I got into different things.

Early on, in the early '70s, the Center had a board which had representatives from different federal agencies that were in the local area. I got to become a representative in that. I think that's when I learned that I liked the safety aspect. I just got my feet wet with all kinds of different things in order for me to say, "Okay, this is what I want to do." Of course it gave me an opportunity to meet a lot of different people, and learn the other directorates, so it was interesting.

WRIGHT: Also, this was an interesting time as far as women were concerned. The shape of women's futures was starting to change in the mid to late '70s with an awareness for new opportunities for women, the women's movement. You mentioned you were on some of those programs. Were those some of the issues that you were tackling trying to open some doors?

FEE: Yes. People in the generation now do not understand. They have so many opportunities that I didn't have. If you were female back in the '60s, even early '70s, and before that, there was not much unless you wanted to sit there and battle and battle and battle.

Now the floodgate has been opened, and they are even and equal to everything. I think NASA even started that before some of the outside world. As far as diversity, NASA was number one, starting out of the gate, versus the outside industry. The government has always been very good about that, I have no qualms about [working for] the government. The government has done a lot for me, it has given me a lot of opportunities. Whenever I've come across a stumbling block or a problem, I've been able to go to somebody. They've always helped me.

WRIGHT: Over the years, even in the early time when you were a secretary, did people start to see you as a go-to person because of your connections and for being in Building 37 for so long?

FEE: As the years came by, yes. In the beginning you had to show people what you were capable of doing. I did my job, then I would always try to go do a little bit more. If I heard somebody say, "Wow, I really need to get this done, I don't know how I'm going to do it," I would ask, "Can I try?" I was always pushing the envelope. "Let me go one step more, let me show you I can do it." It was like, "Can you do this?" "Sure, I can do that." I didn't know how, but I went and learned.

WRIGHT: You figured it out, discovered a lot.

FEE: It really wasn't that complicated. I cheated a little on some aspects, but just so that I could say I hadn't done it but I knew I could do it. Now if they said, "Can you go fly a plane?" Oh no, can't do that, not going to tell you I can.

WRIGHT: Tell me about being here as Building 37 became a building, and they started to shape it to receive the aspects from the lunar mission. Were you involved with being part of the astronaut quarantine facility, or just here at that time when the lunar missions were going on?

FEE: The building itself was built specifically for the Apollo lunar quarantine period. It was three separate buildings butted up against one another. The quarantine section had separate drainage, separate air handlers, separate water system, all of that, because it got sealed up during the 21 days [of quarantine]. You did not know what you were going to encounter going to the Moon, what you'd be bringing back. They wanted to make sure that it did not get in the regular field.

It was an interesting time. I didn't work for the section that was responsible for quarantining the astronauts. I worked for medical research and health stabilization, the prevention for that. When the [Apollo 11] launch happened, we worked 24/7. You worked shift work, you may have to work a little more than your eight hours. After the quarantine then it relaxed and you had time to breathe, and you went back on a normal cycle. But during quarantine, the 21 days, we had the yellow and black quarantine flag flying out in front of the [side]walk. You had a quarantine badge. It said Lunar Receiving Laboratory and it had your name.

We had guards posted in the building. If you were a visitor you had to be escorted by someone, you couldn't just come into the building. You didn't have the capability of just going into any door, you had certain doors you had to go in.

For the people that were in the quarantine, we had two copiers that were built into the walls. One where they could put things on the copier and the copies would come out on your side. Then you went down a couple doors and you could get to another copier, if you needed to get them material on the inside [of the quarantined section]. It was unique.

The conference room, it was separate. It had a half wall, a half glass panel, and it had a microphone in the middle of it so that the medical officers could come over and do a debrief with the crew, the press could come over and ask questions, or the families could come over and visit with their loved ones.

The outer door had a real big thick seal of wax all the way around it. At the end of 21 days they peeled off all of this wax, and the Center Director and the director of the astronaut corps were there to peel off the wax and greet the crew as they came out. Then they had a press conference right out in the front [of the building], where some of the employees gathered around, and the center officials and the press, to be able to ask them questions.

It was nice that the people that I worked for, the health stabilization officers, would go out on the [recovery] aircraft to help with the little trailer that they put the crew in once they recovered them, and then transported them to the building.

I've got a lot of interesting souvenirs over the times. We would get the [mission] envelopes to take down to Florida that were mailed back, and then you got the aircraft mug with the mission [patch] printed on it.

I think the Apollo days are the days that I enjoyed the most. They were exciting. [A time of] the unknown, the uncertainty. It was the type of missions that kept you on the edge of your seat, because NASA was just starting out. No one knew what was going to happen, what to expect. Later on, after so many Shuttle missions, it's like blasé. The enthusiasm and the excitement of the challenge was not there. You're going up, you're doing research. Yes, it's all very interesting, it's all very important, but the awe-striking "gotcha" wasn't there.

WRIGHT: Where were you the night of the first lunar landing? Were you here working?

FEE: Yes.

WRIGHT: So you really felt the excitement. Can you share with me what it was like to know that they landed on the Moon and you were about to really be a part of all?

FEE: We didn't have a television, but we had a radio so we were listening to it. We were trying to look out the window. I remember that, trying to look out the window, to see if we could see the Moon, "Can we see them up there?" Everybody was sitting there, hovered around the radio waiting for them to land. We were just glued. It's like frozen in time. "Here we are. Are they going to get it? Are they going to land on there? Are they going to be able to take off?" That was the other concern. Once they land can they come back?

WRIGHT: You were part of the group that saw them when they were put in this facility. Tell me about that.

FEE: We didn't actually get to see them. They were brought here by their little trailers. The whole west side over here near the dock was barricaded and guarded with all kinds of security. They rolled up the doors and they brought those trailers in. They were housed in here, and unless you had to bring something into the conference room during one of the meetings you didn't see them. You did not see them until afterwards.

WRIGHT: Was it that way for all of the Apollo missions? Or was it just for the first?

FEE: No, all of the Apollo missions. They did all of them the same way.

WRIGHT: Interesting, that they were in the building but so far away. So close yet so far away.

FEE: It was. But beforehand when they were doing all their medical testing and bringing their samples—which invariably they always brought at lunchtime. It's one way to stay thin, [having to handle those] stool and urine samples at lunch.

WRIGHT: Not very appetizing.

FEE: They [the astronauts] were interesting, they were funny. They knew all the people that I had worked with so they'd drop off [their samples] and then go visit them. They weren't like now, [which is] unless you're working one-on-one with them you don't get an opportunity to really see them. Occasionally they'll come by, in the last nine, ten years, come over to get their

blood drawn. But generally that would be done over at the Flight Medicine Clinic over in Building 8.

WRIGHT: I guess it was a smaller, more of a close-knit community back then.

FEE: It was more close-knit. Everybody looked out for one another. At the time, I can remember Rufus [R.] Hessberg [Space Medicine Director] had come down from [NASA] Headquarters [Washington, D.C.]. They were so adamant about us staying in the building in case anything happened, or we were needed for something, or the phones. They would go out and get us hamburgers. There weren't a lot of local areas for eating as there are now. When I first started there was nothing but fields surrounding the Center. You drove to Highway 3 and NASA [Road] 1, up to the little stop sign, made your turn, and there was nothing until you got to NASA.

They had the old Nassau Bay Hilton [hotel], which they tore down, on the corner. It had a little cafeteria. Right down from it there was a fish and chips place, then one hamburger stand. I don't even remember what kind of hamburger place it was. There weren't a lot of places the way there is now.

WRIGHT: You mentioned that you had planned to go to Lamar University. Did you live in Beaumont at the time or were you living in the immediate area?

FEE: I lived outside the area. I lived in Groves [Texas], it's in between Beaumont and Port Arthur. They call it the Golden Triangle.

WRIGHT: So you moved here once you got your full-time job and decided to stay full-time?

FEE: I moved up here when I applied and they said, “You’ve got the job. We need you to come up here and take your test.” I thought oh, maybe I can just fail it, because I really don’t want to leave Groves. I thought, “Well, it’s only for the summer,” so okay. I was going to stay with my aunt, then go back. Then when I got talked into staying, it was like “get your own place.”

WRIGHT: That had to be quite an adventure back in the ‘60s, being a single woman and getting your own place in the area.

FEE: And fresh out of high school. When you’re used to being in a small community, outside of traveling out of state to go see relatives—there was not much being away from home.

WRIGHT: There weren’t a lot of places to stay here either.

FEE: Families didn’t have multiple cars like they do now. The family had one vehicle, and that was it. Families didn’t have all the air conditioning the way they do now either. There’s a lot of changes just in the air factor that people don’t realize, they take for granted. There wasn’t all this electronics. Children’s imaginations were always challenged, because they had to invent things to play with and go outside. They were outside running and doing a lot more than what they do now.

WRIGHT: Where did you live? Did you end up in the Clear Lake area?

FEE: My aunt lived in Dickinson. I moved to apartments over by the [William P.] Hobby Airport because that was the airport at the time. It wasn't that far to drive down.

WRIGHT: You didn't start working in Building 37, you started at Ellington. When did you move?

FEE: At Ellington we were in two buildings, 341 and 343. Then as the Center started to build I moved into Building 16. I was there for maybe six or seven months then I moved to Building 37.

WRIGHT: You talked briefly about how the building has changed because some of the labs have been combined. Can you share with me other ways that the building has changed physically, and with personnel? I'm thinking that when you first came there wasn't as much diversity as you have now.

FEE: They built the building up by knocking out some of the barrier walls, because to get into this quarantine section where we're at now there was one entrance. There was that same entrance, exit to get back out. You could not go down the hall and go all the way to the end of the building. If you went further from the lobby down to the next main hallway, that was the way to get into where all of the hard labs that received the lunar material to do their testing. You

had to don your clothes, to get into all your lab gear, and then that was the way to exit back. There was a guard posted there.

Of course if you pierced a glove or any of that, we had a big system within the building where there were these big red buttons that were punched for the alarm signal. You were told when you worked in this building if you ever heard those alarms, the building will be sealed. You would not exit until the quarantine period was over, for the sake of we do not know what we're bringing back. If plants are growing very well, because we had a plant lab, then what else is in the soil? We didn't know at the time.

WRIGHT: Everything was new.

FEE: It was interesting. I had two small sons, so [I remember thinking that if something happened] they'll just have to have family come take care of them.

WRIGHT: I was going to ask. That's quite a commitment to make, to work in a building that you may be here for weeks if they had to seal the building.

FEE: But you were told that if that happened—chances are it wouldn't. You just had to be aware that that was a condition. That was fine with me.

WRIGHT: Did you work at all with the rocks or with any of the samples?

FEE: They were all in glass cases. We had a big vault where we had little vials of lunar dust that were locked up. We had the log, then we had this combination safe. They were kept in there, they were just tiny little vials.

WRIGHT: You mentioned also they would have press conferences out on the front [lawn]. Were you able to attend those?

FEE: Yes, they encouraged everybody that could be spared. You could go out on the lawn and hear each of the crewmen speak through the PA [public address] system to everyone. It wasn't like a press conference that you think of now where there are questions answered and asked. It was the crew just relating their job well done and their statements, like what they do at Ellington now [after Shuttle missions].

WRIGHT: How did your job change over the years? You said you took all the training that you could, and you found that safety was something that you enjoyed learning about.

FEE: I worked as an equal employment counselor and with the women's committee. One of the issues that we had was this old regime for secretaries. They were just antiquated rules and regs [regulations] of a grading [promotion] system. If you got to the division level, you were not going any higher than a GS [General Schedule]-6 [government pay grade system]. That was it. No ifs, ands or buts. Some of us worked on this, this was unfair. You had good quality people, but you were losing them because you weren't giving them the salary that they were entitled to.

Even the outside world was giving way more than what the government workers were, contrary to what the outside taxpayers think about government employees. That was one thing that I saw that happened.

I went from taking care of one branch level to taking care of two branches, and then finally moving to a division level. I worked as the division chief's secretary. He was the chief medical officer. I worked for him for 17 years. Then he moved over to Building 1, and right after that retired.

I saw a couple other division chiefs come in. I had always been asking and they kept saying, "Well, we're going to get these different jobs for you." I wanted to stay in the same directorate I was in. That was one of the conditions, I didn't want to leave the directorate. I probably could have applied for others, but I was kind of stubborn. I wanted to stay where I knew all the folks because I was happy here, they had done a lot for me.

So I didn't apply for everything, but when there were positions within the directorate that I was interested in, I applied for them. I finally got to be administrative officer. At the time [Judith L.] Judy Robinson [Associate director of Space and Life Sciences at JSC] was in the directorate. That woman, no matter what category you were in, was out to help and better all women. She was fantastic. We were at a retreat and she says, "If you could have your wish"—because I got talked into taking part-time facility manager work—"If you could have your wish, and the magic fairy come through, what would you prefer? Would you rather be an admin officer, or would you rather be a facility manager?"

I said, "No question. Facility manager." She said, "Well, why?" I said, "Because it's challenging, it's keeping something running. It's never the same thing day after day. I like challenges, and I like change. Some people probably don't like a lot of change, but I do. When

you are the facility manager, when you come in the building you may not even have time to drink your coffee. If there's a situation or a problem, you have to be on the run. When you get to work you never know what's going to come at you." So I said, "I'd rather have that."

Then I got called over to Building 1. The next thing I knew they said, "We need you to write a position description, because we're going to change your job." It was like whoa, okay. Then the next thing I know, a couple years after that personnel contacted me and says, "We're going to do a desk audit on you." So I was able to get a grade increase again, since I was maxed out, because of the desk audit that they performed.

WRIGHT: Did you feel like what had happened to you had helped change the grading system for the rest of the secretary and administrative help?

FEE: Well, it was all of the secretaries were changed. They changed the directorate level, making them able to get a GS-7, and they changed the directorate level grades. So it was not just me and my division, it was the whole center.

WRIGHT: A lot of those women had been in those positions a long time, hadn't they?

FEE: For years. A lot of them that got in the position moved on, they wanted more work. A lot of them went to become admin officers. But a couple of the ones that I knew said they really would have liked to have stayed where they were, could they have gotten a grade increase. If all of that had happened early years, might have been different.

WRIGHT: Explain to someone who didn't experience the years of being a secretary, and a branch secretary, and the chief medical officer's secretary—I don't think people truly understand what that entails. I know your days change every day when you walk in as a facility manager, but it was never the same, a lot of times I'm sure, when you were a secretary. You just had so many people you were responsible for.

FEE: It was run the military way. You didn't break chain of command. You could be a secretary in the branch and take care of sections, because they had sections, then they had branches, then they had the division. So a branch secretary could not go to the division, the branch secretary could not go to the directorate. The branch secretary went to the next level up. If she was over a section, she went to the branch. The branch then went to the division. The division then went to the directorate. You never went above what they called the command.

When it first started off, you had procedures. There were certain ways to do travel orders, back then it was all paper travel orders with multiple carbon copies. There were cash advances, there was no credit card system. You went over to Building 1 to the cashier to get your travel advance. There were various forms. Everything was forms, there was even a form if you needed to create a form. It was just a lot of typing.

Then there were papers and journals. You had all of the forms, you had to type these long papers. Sometimes if they had equations in them, you had to change the key for the symbol key. It was constantly taking these little keys off and on, off and on. Then if you typed too fast the keys would go together and get stuck, so you had to take them apart so you could get them to go back down. You couldn't type really fast. Then when the electric typewriter came out it was like oh my goodness, this is a dream.

WRIGHT: Especially when the typewriter had the correction tape in it, where you could backspace and it would correct it.

FEE: That was later, that wasn't the very first ones that came out. Later on you had the little interchangeable balls. I don't know what was better, putting the key in or changing that ball and putting another ball on. If you didn't put it on right, boy, that ball would go fwoo [rolling across the room].

Everything had to be letter-perfect. If it was being sent off the Center, you couldn't have erasures. So if you got down to the very bottom and you had a typo, you had to rip that thing out of the typewriter and start all over from scratch. You had to be not interrupted if it was something like that, so that you could make sure. "Let me get this right."

WRIGHT: You had quite a group of personalities, I'm sure, that you worked with as well, because you had so many different types of people. The medical people and the science people, as you said the military background people.

FEE: There were a multitude of personalities. Some were what we call difficult people. I even took a training class about how to work with difficult people. One individual—everybody termed him the hothead. The first day we had an afternoon break and the instructor says, "Do you work with him every day?" I said, "Yes." He said, "Why are you taking this class?" I thought uh-oh, but you just had to be able to—everyone's temperamental. Physicians are

different than researchers, they're all different than engineers. Everyone has different personalities. Military, they're totally different.

WRIGHT: And men from women. When did you actually have a woman boss?

FEE: I had a woman boss in the early '90s.

WRIGHT: That must have been different.

FEE: A lot of people weren't so keen about wanting to work for a woman. It doesn't bother me. They have a different style. They're more focused on their agenda than getting off track like men do, because men will do that. They'll have a chain of thought, then it's like they get onto something else. Women that I've worked for, they are focused. "Go down this path, I want to get this done, then we go to the next."

WRIGHT: What were your thoughts when you learned that the astronaut corps was going to change and allow women to apply, and women scientists to apply?

FEE: I was glad. As a matter of fact, the assistant division chief that I also worked for is now the head of the astronaut corps.

WRIGHT: Oh, Peggy [A. Whitson].

FEE: Yes. She was great to work for, she was. She gave you a lot of latitude on doing your job. If you earned her trust, you had her trust.

WRIGHT: You only have a day and a half left in this building officially. What are some of your most memorable thoughts and favorite memories of being here?

FEE: I would have to say Apollo 11 was the greatest time in my experience, just because of all the challenges, the excitement. What a difference from anything I have experienced since then. Everything was unknown, everything was new. It was like a horse coming out of the gate, you didn't know where this horse was going to go. It's like riding at night with blinders on. It was interesting.

WRIGHT: Since you've become facility manager, have you had a time that was extremely challenging? You mentioned that when you walk in sometimes you've got to hit the ground running, because you've got to go deal with a problem.

FEE: Yes, we had a lot of pipes in the ceiling break, so you have to be familiar with the mop. You have to know what's going on in your laboratories in order to know what type of equipment you have in there, because when you get these types of situations you have to be able to protect your equipment. Know what's going on. Are they doing experiments? What's happening?

At first it was a little rocky working with the maintenance and the construction folks. It was like you're not one of the guys, you're a woman. They will work for you and do what you tell them, but they're going to go to the man to convey all the stuff. I had to learn to make them

direct their statements and react to me. I had to show them, “Hey, I know what I’m doing, do what I ask.” Over time they learned, and I learned, and they were great. I’ve had people in the building who want to remodel their areas.

The very first job that I tackled was the clinical laboratories. The clinical lab director had wanted for years—she had five different rooms. She says, “I need one huge laboratory, because the equipment is large, and we all need to be able to swap it around and change stations, but they won’t let me knock out the walls.” I said, “Why not?” She said, “Well, they say that the walls are support walls.” I said, “Let me go in there and look.” How can it be a support wall? There’s not even any sheetrock all the way down to the floor, all it is is a chase. You’ve got pipes and wires coming down. I said, “So why not? “Let’s develop something.”

Then once that took off, then the other labs started coming to me. “We want to remodel. How can we do this?” “Well, what all do you need? Have you thought of...? Let’s do this.” We’ve knocked out a lot of the 16-inch concrete walls to break down small rooms to make it more advantageous for larger areas that are more flow-efficient. They’re getting more space by knocking out all these humongous walls, but they still have the flow within the area where everybody’s still connected. We’ve remodeled almost every one of the labs in this building.

I think one of the biggest challenges that I had was the pharmacology lab. They were doing some FDA [Food and Drug Administration] studies, and we have to have a separate air system and humidity control, because we’ve got to be able to maintain this. We had a lot of meetings. It took us a long time to be able to get the architects and what we actually needed to be able to start the design phase of it. It took about two years for that to actually happen.

WRIGHT: I'm going to feel safe in saying that probably nobody knows this building as well as you do, inside and out?

FEE: Well, everybody says I know the nooks and crannies. There are some places that dead-end to nowhere, and that's because the flow of the building and the design has changed. Unfortunately it is a full-time job keeping this building up because it's just so antiquated. I was fortunate enough that I got COD [Center Operations Directorate] to refurbish two air handlers. One was a critical one over a big majority of the laboratories. When they took out the coils and all the pipes on that, it was so rusted that the coils were just crumbling. This is the air that's getting circulated with the condensate water that you're breathing in. It was horrible, everybody was commenting how nasty it was.

There's a lot of history. It'll never go back to Apollo days, because this was three separate buildings connected, trying to build them as one and make them function as one, that's just taken a lot of money. It's going to keep taking a lot of money to keep this thing running because this was built in the '60s. It's just like a house, you just really have to redo everything. Before I started, whenever anyone remodeled they didn't remove the excess, so when I came in and had the labs redone, we had to gut everything. You can pop the ceiling tiles, and you could not imagine how many abandoned pipes and things are up there. It was just horrible.

When we did this last refurbishment of this air handler for this southwest side, I went up there with them. They said, "We've got this one pipe, but we can't identify where it's going to. Can you help us? It's not on the as-built drawings." We looked down into the chase. It's not going to anyplace, cannot find out where this is going to. It's unrealistic of where it's showing that it's going, there's nothing there. So we just shut it down thinking, "it's probably something

that was abandoned, because it's not even marked any longer." Well, lo and behold, it was to the two air handlers that are inside the clinical lab.

That was unfortunately at a point where the valve had already been sheared off, so the superintendent came over, got his workers together and they brought us all these spot coolers to keep our labs going. They immediately changed course and redesigned what they were going to do. Instead of doing it all at once, they put in separate valves. I said, "Please, whatever you do, do not leave today until you mark this, so that somebody in the future knows what these pipes are going to." You would never have guessed that that was a pipe leading to the air handlers from the location of where it was at.

We had to open the doorway to get from the Center over to the main labs over here—all the nutrition labs, they have this 16-inch concrete cinder block wall. Then they have this little gap and they have this sheetrock wall over it. Well, when you pull out the concrete, you don't know what type of pipes and stands are coming in there, so they started to remove the sheetrock wall. Lo and behold, there's an electrical raceway across the wall. Is it dead? No, it's live. Who in the world would have done that, you don't bury a live raceway in there.

I don't know, I don't do facilities stuff anymore. That's a nice feeling to be able to say that.

WRIGHT: I understand we have a basement.

FEE: We do. For years—and to this day people still believe that we are keeping the alien down there. Let me tell you, I've been there are a multitude of times—and I will not lie to you—there

are no aliens in the Building 37 basement. It's 90 feet. If that elevator breaks, you are going to get one good cardio workout, and I have done that.

WRIGHT: Is it used for anything at all anymore?

FEE: Right now it's used for storage. Back in the Apollo days it was used for the radiation area. For a while the Science Directorate had a low-level counting lab in there, which they've since removed. A few years back we had the halon system released, when the fire techs [technicians] were doing their bell testing. They've recently put in the new system, but because the elevator is always going out, it's just used for storage. It was 90 feet down, you can't even get cell phone reception. There are no windows, there's no restroom down there. That's just cruel to put somebody down there. But everybody wants to go down. "We've always heard about the Building 37 basement, we want to go down there." What for? It's one big room with a long hallway that goes to a small room. That's it, that's all you're going to see.

WRIGHT: No ghosts, no aliens.

FEE: No. Then a door going up to the stairs. You take them down there and it's, "Oh, is this it?" This is it, the grand tour.

WRIGHT: It's like you grew up with NASA, you came here when it was so new. Now it's celebrated 50 years and you've been with it for almost that entire time. What do you think you're going to miss the most?

FEE: I think the excitement and the people. It's been exciting. It's been interesting to watch how NASA has changed, it's different. I don't think it has registered that I'm retiring, because I'm still doing things and meeting with people. Wednesday [November 30, 2011] will be my last day, and I think Thursday morning it's going to hit me. I've tried not to get emotional. It's like no, no tears. This is not a sad occasion. It's sad in the fact that you're not going to get to see me, but you have my phone number, you can always call me. 45 years. I've earned this, it's time for me to rest.

In the economic times that we're in right now, there are a lot of people without jobs. There are a lot of young people with young families. I've had my turn, I'm going to do okay. It's time for others to come in to be able to get a job, and be able to get a rewarding satisfaction of saying, "I've been with NASA 40 years, 45 years, 30 years."

NASA has been a great place to work. I'm so glad that I did not say, "You all don't know what you're talking about, I'm going to college."

WRIGHT: What a different life you would have had.

FEE: There's no telling what I would be doing now. So hindsight—they knew what was best for me.

WRIGHT: Our time is almost up. Are there other memories you would like to share before we close?

FEE: No, I think we've covered everything. It's a great place for people to work. It's exciting. I told them if we ever get a new building to replace 37, they have got to call me. I've been hearing since the '70s that they're going to replace 37 and I've yet to see it. I would like to see that. I would like to be able to see us go to Mars or go back to the Moon. I think there's a lot more that we could have done on the Moon than just go to it, and I think that we have the capability now to do that. I would like to see that happen.

WRIGHT: Before we close, I wanted to ask you about the recent [Apollo 11 lunar landing 40th] anniversary. You had the plaques made that identify the different aspects of the [history of the] building, then you hosted the event, inviting the Apollo astronauts to come.

FEE: We had two, we had [Neil A.] Armstrong and we had [Edwin E. "Buzz"] Aldrin [Jr.].

WRIGHT: Quite a celebration you had in the building.

FEE: We had a lot of the medical officers that were here during that time, and the science people that were here that took care of the rocks. That was fun. It was really interesting to see how we've all wrinkled and grayed. But yes, we had one afternoon. It was a dedication ceremony [June 10, 2010]. We had the plaques that are throughout the southwest side to indicate where the crew was brought in, where the Moon rocks were brought in, where the crew reception area, where they ate and watched television, where they slept. Then the infamous Conference Room 1 where they gave their debriefs and met with their families.

WRIGHT: I'm glad that didn't happen after you left, that you got to be part of all of that.

FEE: Well, they needed me out in the lobby, because no one else was here to remember who the people were. It's like everybody that attended, I had worked for and they've retired. When they come back for a visit, they come in and stop and see me. I have told them, "I'm going to retire. You all are not going to have anybody left to come say hello to."

WRIGHT: I know it was probably a good comfort to them to know you were here still taking care of the building. Thanks so much for squeezing this session in your departure schedule, and I wish you the best of luck with all your new adventures.

FEE: I know everybody keeps saying, "You can't just stop working, you got to go out and do something." I need to rest for a while, let me just see what happens. I've got a lot of things that I'm behind on at the house, so I've got plenty to keep me going for a while.

WRIGHT: I'm sure you'll find lots to do. Thanks again.

[End of interview]