

**NASA HEADQUARTERS NACA ORAL HISTORY PROJECT
ORAL HISTORY TRANSCRIPT**

JO DIBELLA
INTERVIEWED BY JENNIFER ROSS-NAZZAL
SAN JOSE, CALIFORNIA – 2 OCTOBER 2005

The questions in this transcript were asked during an oral history session with Jo Dibella. Ms. Dibella has amended the answers for clarification purposes. As a result, this transcript does not exactly match the audio recording.

ROSS-NAZZAL: Today is October 2nd, 2005. This oral history session is being conducted with Jo Dibella of NACA [National Advisory Committee for Aeronautics] Headquarters as part of the NACA Oral History Project sponsored by the NASA [National Aeronautics and Space Administration] Headquarters History Office. This interview is being held in San Jose, California, during the eleventh NACA Reunion. The interviewer is Jennifer Ross-Nazzal.

Thank you so much for meeting with me today. I really appreciate it. Before we begin to talk about your NACA career, I thought it would be nice to get some background on you. So if you could tell me where you were born and raised.

DIBELLA: I was born in Hillside, New Jersey.

ROSS-NAZZAL: And were you raised in New Jersey, as well?

DIBELLA: Yes. Went to school, graduated high school there.

ROSS-NAZZAL: Did you attend college?

DIBELLA: No.

ROSS-NAZZAL: Did you marry?

DIBELLA: No.

ROSS-NAZZAL: Do you have any children?

DIBELLA: No.

ROSS-NAZZAL: How did you become employed by NACA?

DIBELLA: Well, it all started—years back we had to take a civil service test in order to work for the government, and the government had quotas from every state. So many from New Jersey, so many from New York, so many from Wyoming, and so forth, so the government had quotas. I took a test in Newark, New Jersey, and it was a general test, plus typing. Then I don't know how many days or weeks afterwards, I got a letter from the government offering me a temporary job. Obviously I passed the tests. It was from the Social Security Board. Would I accept a three-month appointment?

I thought, "I'll ask my parents if I should accept this offer to work in Washington D.C., a couple of hundred miles away from home."

They said, "Yes, why not? For three months? It would be a good experience."

Before I left home for Washington, I worked for a lawyer at five dollars a week. I accepted the offer and went by train to Washington. In those days Washington had many boardinghouses and rooming houses. I would say that most of the people who came to work from out of state lived in rooming or boardinghouses or the YMCA [Young Men's Christian Association] or the YWCA [Young Women's Christian Association]. That's the way it was here in the city.

In June 1937, I rented a room in a rooming house off North Capitol Street, near the Capitol and close to Union Station, the railroad station. Commuting by trolley, I worked in the Adjudications Section of the Social Security Board located at 23rd Street and Constitution Avenue. The temporary position was Junior Stenographer at Grade CAF-2, \$1440 per annum; I typed letters that lawyers wrote. After three months I was offered an extension, which I accepted.

Since my appointment was temporary, in March 1938 I accepted an offer from the Census Bureau at the Commerce Department at a salary of \$1260 per annum. I left the Social Security Board and went to the Census Bureau and worked there from 1938 to 1942.

One afternoon I attended a concert at the Agriculture Department auditorium where a man who directed a choir in one of the churches in Washington, a Baptist Church, was directing a singing group. Not that they were employees there, but anyone who liked group singing could join this group. I met a girl there who was in the audience. She asked me where I worked.

I said, "I work at Census Bureau." I was there for about three years, I guess, three or four years. "Why? Why do you ask?"

"Well," she said, "we need secretaries where I work." She worked in the Personnel Office. "Are you a secretary?" she asked me.

I said, “Yes, I could take dictation.”

She said, “Why don’t you come over to where I work, NACA?” I didn’t know what NACA was.

So she said, “Well, come in for an interview. I’ll introduce you to Miss Wheeler, head of the secretarial group.”

I said, “Okay, I’ll see if I can find time to come over.” The interview went well and I was hired to join the secretarial pool. There were about a half a dozen girls in the group. Then when I went to report for work, I was assigned to a newly hired engineer who had just come from Ohio. He worked at Wright Patterson Air Force Base, Ohio. He was a civilian engineer at Wright Patterson. At NACA, he was hired to handle the NACA Power Plants Committee plus a couple of its subcommittees. I worked for Mr. Thomas T. Neill for about fifteen years, taking dictation from him and at times other people, when necessary.

In the meantime, while I was at—well, I should preface this. We were at Dupont Circle working in a mansion formerly belonging to the Leiter family which the government took over on Dupont Circle at Connecticut Avenue. It was a four story mansion. We had a complement of maybe fifty on the payroll. Our telephone sheet had two columns of names. [Laughs] So during that time I also took dictation from Dr. William Frederick Durand of Stanford University in Stanford, California, who was one of the main NACA Committee members. Let’s see. I want to show you here. My love. He is such a dear. This one right here. [Shows photograph]

ROSS-NAZZAL: Oh, isn’t that nice.

DIBELLA: He lived at Stanford University campus and also taught there. As a member of both, he would spend early A.M. hours at NACA then would go to the National Academy of Sciences' offices on Constitution Avenue.

ROSS-NAZZAL: When you heard about this position at NACA, did you do any sort of research to find out what NACA was and what it did?

DIBELLA: No, I didn't. Whenever I told someone I worked for NACA, I would be asked, "What's that?" The only thing is, when you're in high school—you graduated high school—did they ask you what you wanted to pursue?

ROSS-NAZZAL: At some point, yes, I think so.

DIBELLA: They printed it in our yearbook—aviation. Some of the other students, my buddies and friends, "Aviation? What are you going to do? Aviation? You're going to pursue aviation?"

I said, "Well, that's what I put down, because I used to like to go to the airport and hang around and watch all the airplanes come in and out, and so forth," since I didn't live too far from the airport. But anyway, that's what I chose.

But they said, "Well, listen, we're going to Washington." The graduating class always went to Washington. That was a big deal. I don't know where your graduation class—you probably went to Spain, like my niece. [Laughs] Where did you go?

ROSS-NAZZAL: They didn't have any trips when I graduated.

DIBELLA: They didn't?

ROSS-NAZZAL: No. No, we didn't go anywhere.

DIBELLA: How come? Did the school ever have it?

ROSS-NAZZAL: I think that there may have been some opportunities to go on smaller trips, but not necessarily the entire class.

DIBELLA: Well, ours was this big trip. I didn't go. "Why don't you want to come?" I was asked by many of my friends. There were reasons, and they were good ones. My folks—they were poor. My father was the only one working in the family, and in a family of six kids, hey, you don't just go out and buy clothes and new things just to go have a good time. That was verboten.

Anyway, so I didn't go with the class. They said, "You'll never get there. It's so far away." Exactly, from my house to Washington, is two hundred and fifteen miles. I didn't take the trip with them. All the kids had a great time visiting Washington. Three days, I think they had. But that didn't mean anything to me, because I didn't go, see? They said, "Well, you're never going to get there. It's so far away." Okay, so I didn't get there, right? Until later on.

Well, I stayed with Mr. Neill, the engineer, for about fourteen years, and I was asked one day if I would work for the Secretary of NACA. I said, "No, I don't think I want to leave Mr. Neill. I don't want to leave Mr. Neill. He's been good to me, and I've been here so long, you

know, and I like what I'm doing for him and the other group in his office." Dr. John F. Victory, the Secretary of NACA, was the first NACA employee. Hey, I could have been up there with him, but I wouldn't take the job. They thought I was crazy not to take it. It was a raise in pay, as well. But I stayed with Mr. Neill.

Then one day I heard that Dr. Hugh L. Dryden, who was the Director at that time, his secretary was leaving, going back—she was leaving her job and going back to Ohio to live. Mr. Neill told me they had a list of girls, secretaries, that were eligible that they would call for an interview, and in order to work for Dr. Dryden, you also had to work for the Associate Director, John W. Crowley who came from Langley Field in Hampton, Virginia. So there was Dryden, Crowley, and Victory, the three top men, okay? So he said, "Jo, I know you refused the invitations to work for Dr. Victory, and he has asked you why you didn't want to work for him. But," he said, "you're on the list for this job to work for Dr. Dryden and Mr. Crowley, and when you go up there for an interview, I don't want you to refuse it, because you're the first one on the list."

"Oh. Oh yes? Who did that list?"

Well, Helen did it, his secretary. She made the list up. I had the interview, not with Dr. Dryden, but with Mr. Crowley who said, after a brief interview, "You're hired." That's how I got to work for these two wonderful gentlemen.

Then when Dr. James H. Doolittle would come in, he was our Chairman of the main NACA Committee. He came in and had an office they set up for him whenever he was there. From my desk and through the open door, I could see where somebody made his way up to the ninth floor by using the steps. One day, Dr. Doolittle arrived at my office. I said, "Did you walk up the steps?"

He said, “Sure.”

I said, “Well, why didn’t you take the elevator?”

He said, “I’m practicing. I’m getting my legs in shape, because I’m going to Alaska to hunt sheep.”

On one occasion, I was sent in to take dictation from him, and the telephone happened to ring, and he said, “Who is this? What do you need? Oh, okay. Well, make sure you get every name spelled correctly.” Whoever was calling him, and I don’t know who called—it could have been from a newspaper—was asking the names of his crew when they bombed Tokyo. But what stuck in my mind was when he told the caller, “You get the names spelled right,” because there were a lot of people whose last name ended with -ski; they weren’t Jones and Smith. And he spelled them all over the phone. Boy, you can’t get away with anything with this man. You’d better get the spelling right. He was very sharp, real good. But anyway, those days were wonderful. We had wonderful times, and I was happy to go to work every day, no matter what the weather was.

Then we became NASA in 1958, the transition, of course. Those were exciting times, because of Sputnik. We moved from the ninth floor on H Street to the Dolly Madison house next door, where the first Administrator, Dr. T. Keith Glennan, served his term. Later, when Mr. James E. Webb followed Dr. Glennan as Administrator, NASA had its own building (F0B-6) at 4th and C Streets, SW. Dr. Dryden had an office on the southwest corner, and Mr. James E. Webb had an office on the northwest corner.

Oh, but prior to that—I’m getting ahead of myself—when we became NASA, we were in the Dolly Madison House off Lafayette Square across from the White House. Dr. Glennan interviewed a girl outside of NASA. She might have come from the State Department, I’m not

sure. But he told me the reason he didn't select me as his secretary was because he would only be there for two years, which I appreciated, and he said, "I wouldn't take you away from Dr. Dryden."

I said, "Well, I wouldn't leave Dr. Dryden." I wanted him to know even if he asked me, I wouldn't leave, and he knew that. So that was okay. But we had a good relationship, and we worked in those offices. Dr. Dryden's office was a meeting room. It was a huge room. On the conference table, machinery was set up to have the first telephone communication from Washington to Australia via the satellite, and that was an experiment they were doing at NASA at that time. So Dr. Dryden was the first to talk to Australia via satellite. That was exciting, to have the first satellite transmission. Very good. Hey, it worked. So he did talk to somebody in Australia.

And, of course, Dr. Dryden got ill, unfortunately. He attended so many meetings everywhere in the world in smoke-filled places. As it was customary in the government, they have medical exams of all the officials. The exam revealed a spot on his lung. This man never smoked in his life, but he was in very many smoke-filled rooms, and that's what they concluded probably started the cancer in his lungs. Of all things, good God. So that's what he died from.

Anyway, I'm telling you the history of his life.

ROSS-NAZZAL: Well, you worked for him for quite a long time.

DIBELLA: Ten years I worked for him, yes. It was in 1955 when I was first in his office. But we had wonderful times. It was a good association. It was truly a treasured privilege to work for Dr. Dryden.

When Dr. Dryden died, however, of course, I was included with the family in the church as well as at the burial. There were fifty black limousines—fifty, from Washington to Baltimore, Maryland.

I didn't stay in that office anymore, because Mr. Webb came on board, and Dr. Glennan had finished his two-year term. What else? Oh, yes, I moved out of that building and went to work for the Aerodynamics Division. You work for one boss for ten years, and then you have about six bosses in a couple of years. [Laughs] You have to adjust to every single one of them. So I don't know who came on. Who did I have, Dr. Adams, Mac C. Adams? James M. Beggs? Oh, Roy Jackson [phonetic]. Roy Jackson was the last boss I had. I don't know how long you've worked, but when you go from one boss to the next, you have them for a year, nine months, whatever.

Mr. Beggs used to work for Westinghouse, and when he came, they gave him the job of head of the Aerodynamics Division. Half the time he was across the street at FAA [Federal Aviation Administration]. So I said to him, "Mr. Beggs, you work here, don't you? You were hired for the NASA. You work for NASA."

He said, "Well, they've asked me to participate," and so he was spending a lot of time across the street rather than—but he was good-natured about it.

But I said, "You've stayed here long enough to have a baby, and that's it." Nine months, and then he left. But he's a nice guy to work with. And I got along with all the other men. I said, "Gee." But, you know, it takes something to get used to after you've had Dryden, Durand, Crowley. Hey. But I got along with them all right.

By 1972 I decided that it was time to retire, knowing the benefits would be better than staying on board for some other jobs. After Dr. Dryden died, Mr. Webb wanted to create a job for me. I didn't want him to do that.

ROSS-NAZZAL: What would have been the position?

DIBELLA: Teach other secretaries. Hey, wait a minute. When you hire somebody, you're hiring because of the qualifications they have. I have to teach them something? I have to teach them this? No way. I told him, "I thank you very much for trying." He tried to create this new job. But he was willing to do that, and I said, "No, I can't accept that. I don't want to teach anyone."

Because I felt like telling him, "Look, I had to know what to do in order to get a job, so the people they hire today, they don't take civil service exams anymore." I don't know how they hire; I really don't. I don't know how they get their jobs. When I was hired, you had to pass a test, and they held tests all over the country. That's how they hired people for civil service. It's changed. Everything's changed.

An opening came in the Aerodynamics Section across the street. We had another building; the two buildings were close. So I accepted that. I said, "I'll go to Aerodynamics. I know those people over there." So that's how that worked.

ROSS-NAZZAL: Let me ask you some more questions about NACA.

DIBELLA: Sure.

ROSS-NAZZAL: When you first started working for NACA, this is the late thirties. What were working conditions like over at NACA?

DIBELLA: The conditions, well, I tell you, I started in '42.

ROSS-NAZZAL: Oh, you started in '42.

DIBELLA: I started with NACA in February of '42. That's when I started, those conditions, yes. They were good. Like I say, we only had about fifty on the payroll. I don't know, what do you want to know about, the first floor? Of course, that was the entrance where Helen Robinson—I hope when she comes, she'll tell you about that. That contained the engineers, like the one I worked for, Mr. Neill, the secretaries across the way; and a few more engineers in the—we worked in the ballroom. Oh, yes, that ballroom was—the ballroom was huge in this house, I'll tell you. Then, well, they put a partition on one end, and then the next door were a couple more, two or four, engineers next door. Then Russ [Russell G.] Robinson, who happens to be the husband of Helen Robinson, he had an office by himself. All part of the ballroom. Then in the front of the building near the Circle—Dupont Circle—was Dr. George W. Lewis' office, and outside his office was a small room where there was a secretary to him and a secretary to Dr. Victory. And then one room for Dr. Durand whenever he came in from Stanford.

Then there was an elevator fit for maybe only two people—it was an old building—up to the fourth floor or the attic. I think it went to maybe the third floor. Yes, I think it was the third floor. Dr. Jerome C. Hunsaker, NACA Chairman, came from Massachusetts every time they had the meetings. He would take the elevator to the third floor to walk up to the attic, which was a

finished room. In that room was a bed. Anytime he came in from Massachusetts to attend a meeting, that's where he would stay overnight. We saw him a number of times walking across Dupont Circle to the laundry. He was carrying his laundry underneath his arm. [Laughs]

Oh, dear. Those were good old days. You asked me about good old days. We had fun the first years I was there, yes. This was a good life. Ask me more questions. Maybe I can answer them.

ROSS-NAZZAL: What was your work schedule like? Were you working eight to five, or were you working longer hours?

DIBELLA: No, we had regular hours, eight to four-thirty. Eight to four-thirty, I think that was it. When we worked overtime, we worked overtime. During the war, we worked Saturdays. Always worked that for sure.

ROSS-NAZZAL: What other impacts did World War II have on your employment at NACA, besides working some overtime?

DIBELLA: Just worked, that's all. I don't know what I can tell you about that. It was a war town. A lot of soldiers in town, always.

ROSS-NAZZAL: Was there a dress code at NACA? Was there a dress code at Headquarters?

DIBELLA: A dress code?

ROSS-NAZZAL: Yes.

DIBELLA: No. But those days, they don't dress like today, of course. You wore what you had to wear. You were covered. [Laughs]

ROSS-NAZZAL: And what would you wear to work, typically?

DIBELLA: I wore sport clothes most of the time. Fully dressed. Dresses all the time, never pants, never.

ROSS-NAZZAL: Did you wear a hat?

DIBELLA: I never wore a hat. From the very beginning, my mother couldn't get me to wear a hat. I wouldn't even wear a scarf in the wintertime. No, I was bareheaded most of the time, even when I went to school. I own one hat, which I don't wear. It's been in the box for years. The feather might just be [makes sound]. [Laughter] No, we dressed normally. Not like today.

Hey, I was at the mall yesterday, San Jose Mall, at the end of the car line or whatever; I don't know where it was. Uh, terrible. Well, it's the same way in Washington. I'll tell you, I don't know how the girls—I used to—if you're recording this, I don't want to tell you that, but anyway, you know, we covered ourselves up. We were not naked from here and here. See-through blouses? Oh, god, forget it. No, we were fully dressed. I can't tell you anything about that other than we were fully dressed.

ROSS-NAZZAL: Okay.

DIBELLA: That's all.

ROSS-NAZZAL: You said that there were around fifty people working there. Did you have any social activities, Christmas parties?

DIBELLA: We had picnics, NACA picnics. One time we had one that was held in Maryland, and it was at a regular picnic ground, when Langley Aeronautical Laboratory people came up from Hampton, Virginia. Yes, a group came up, and they—what did they do? It was their own invention, I guess. I don't know. I have never seen anything like it. They set up aluminum sheets with hooks on them and added pieces of chicken on the hooks. A fire was built which cooked them. They were delicious. I remember that one picnic very well. Then they had a place where you could play baseball, ride swings, and dance.

ROSS-NAZZAL: Did you spend a lot of time with people who you worked with in the office outside of the office?

DIBELLA: Not I. No, I didn't.

ROSS-NAZZAL: Give me an idea of what sort of equipment you were working with when you first started at NACA and how that changed when you left in '72.

DIBELLA: [Laughs] Well, when I was in the secretarial pool, I was assigned a desk next to a huge window. There were about four desks in one row, in four—you know, like that. My desk was made of metal with a center drop for the typewriter. Everybody else had manual typewriters.

All of a sudden—I don't know when they started, but I was the first one to be issued an IBM (International Business Machines) electric machine. That machine had the whatever they call the—it didn't have this kind of printing. [Demonstrates] Now, let me see. Yes. Yes, it did. I forget what they call this kind of printing. The newspaper printing is different from what that is, because every time you made a mistake—if you had a capital M, and you wanted it to be an N, you had to know exactly how many backspaces you had to go. How many—one, two, three, four, five. Okay, cut that out. Then you'd hit N, and that would only take four, say. That's executive type; I think that's what they called the executive type.

Anyway, I was issued this electric IBM machine, the first, and let me tell you, even with a felt pad this thick [demonstrates], with a typewriter on it, on a metal base, noisy. Boy, was it noisy. [Laughs] I felt sorry for everybody else, but Miss Wheeler issued that machine to me because I was typing all of the minutes of the meetings, the different meetings. So anyway, I was the first one to get that IBM machine. I thought, "Oh, boy."

ROSS-NAZZAL: What other equipment did you have besides that?

DIBELLA: That's all. That and a telephone—no, I didn't even have a telephone. Did I? I don't remember a telephone.

ROSS-NAZZAL: Did that change at all over the years?

DIBELLA: Oh, sure, you know. I don't remember that. That I don't remember—telephone? Well, when you had your own office, then you got your telephone, but I never had my own office at NACA. We were always in a group.

ROSS-NAZZAL: Was it common for most people to have telephones when you first started?

DIBELLA: The engineers had telephones on their desk, and if they needed us, they'd buzz.

[Laughs]

ROSS-NAZZAL: So did you have some box on your desk so you knew when you were needed?

DIBELLA: No, no. No room for it, because when you had the typewriter here and then a little bit here for the drawers, and over here. [Demonstrates]

ROSS-NAZZAL: You mentioned that you were typing minutes from the meetings. Did you get to attend those meetings and take notes in shorthand?

DIBELLA: No. Only the engineer would attend the meetings. He would report on the progress of the whole meeting. Then he would dictate them to me. Do you want to know something?

ROSS-NAZZAL: Sure.

DIBELLA: No, you can't print this stuff. I can't tell you that.

ROSS-NAZZAL: All right.

DIBELLA: Cut it all.

ROSS-NAZZAL: So what sort of skills did you have to have to be a secretary? You mentioned that you had to have these skills when you came on board that not necessarily everyone had.

DIBELLA: Well, being a high school graduate, what other skills do you have? Either you're good at typing and good at taking dictation. Other than that, you don't have—you know, like colleges, you don't have all this extra. I didn't have that. I didn't go to college. I'm just an ordinary high school kid. The only course I took was the commercial course, which included typing, stenography, bookkeeping; duties that required office work.

ROSS-NAZZAL: Did you learn shorthand?

DIBELLA: Oh yes. I was good at both shorthand and typing. I was playing basketball at one of the places downtown, and, of course, you know how many girls are on a basketball team. You know, five on each side, right? Well, I was under the basket with a bunch of other girls, and we

were all trying to get the ball. I guess I jumped the highest since the ball came down and hit my finger, breaking the first joint. You see this? Well, that's the way it is.

ROSS-NAZZAL: Oh, my goodness.

DIBELLA: The basketball did that.

ROSS-NAZZAL: Ouch.

DIBELLA: Broke this connection here, from this—the end of this bone hit the end of this bone, and the chip is sitting up there, [demonstrates] and they couldn't do anything about it. So here I am. After a week I go to the doctor, who said, "You have a chip there, but I can't do any—." What happens, if you let it go too long, the fluid hardens in between the broken chip, the chip there, and the connection to the bone. The doctor didn't do anything but give me a splint. So here I am with a splint on my finger like this [demonstrates], straight as could be, and I'm typing the minutes of the meetings on this electric typewriter, with this splint. And it's been that way since. It healed, but it's crooked. Not like that.

ROSS-NAZZAL: There's quite a large difference.

DIBELLA: You're darn tootin'. But they said, "What are you doing, typing with a splint on your finger?" With an electric typewriter you don't have to do this [demonstrates], you just touch. Well, you know that.

ROSS-NAZZAL: Much easier than a manual, where you have to really—

DIBELLA: Absolutely.

ROSS-NAZZAL: —type hard.

DIBELLA: Yes, right. You didn't have to do that, see?

ROSS-NAZZAL: Did you belong to any sort of national secretarial organizations?

DIBELLA: No, I never joined anything.

ROSS-NAZZAL: Do you recall, was there any sort of competition between the NACA Laboratories that you recall?

DIBELLA: What was the question?

ROSS-NAZZAL: Was there any sort of competition between the NACA Laboratories while you were working in Headquarters?

DIBELLA: What kind of competition are you talking about?

ROSS-NAZZAL: Any sort of competition. Competition in research or—

DIBELLA: The research end, that's out of the secretary's mind. All they do is do what the boss tells you to do, so I don't know that.

ROSS-NAZZAL: Let's see here. Did you have a sense of what NACA's relationship was like with the various administrations while you were working as a secretary for NACA?

DIBELLA: Well, there were a lot of things that went on up on the Hill, but I never went up on the Hill to hear. Even in the budget hearings, we were not allowed to attend.

ROSS-NAZZAL: What impact do you think Sputnik had on NACA? Or what are your memories of that time at NACA?

DIBELLA: Well, it was an exciting time when you saw that thing up in the sky, you know, but we did just what we had to do. We would just follow what the brains, the Drydens and the heads did. There was nothing we could—you know. We did what our bosses told us to do.

ROSS-NAZZAL: When Dryden became the Director of NACA, did that change anything at NACA Headquarters?

DIBELLA: No. When he came to NACA?

ROSS-NAZZAL: When he became Director.

DIBELLA: When he became the Director? He succeeded Dr. Lewis who had medical problems. Nothing changed when he took over; it was the same. Incidentally, many of us old NACA-ers don't like the idea that it's now the John H. Glenn [Research Center, previously the Lewis Research Center, Cleveland, Ohio] facility. I still refer to it as the Lewis Lab.

ROSS-NAZZAL: Why is that?

DIBELLA: When you dedicate something to somebody, like the Washington Monument, for instance, would you change that to John Adams? Whoever heard of changing anything that was dedicated to a person because he contributed all—and Dr. Lewis was responsible for the Lewis Research Center being in operation, built. It's sad. Everybody was sad about that. Even Harry [Harold B.] Finger wrote letters to congressmen saying, "Hey, in the first place, John Glenn should have refused and said, 'Oh, no, please don't name that after me. I didn't do any—.'" What did he do? He didn't do anything to create this Laboratory up here. What is this? Oh, we were [makes sound]—.

The girl who worked for Dr. Dryden first, she lives in Ohio, and she's still living, Helen Smith. Oh, boy. I said, "Helen, what do you think of this?"

"What do I think of it?" she asked. That was her boss, Dr. Lewis, yes. Then she became Dr. Dryden's boss—I mean, secretary to him. Terrible. Anyway, would you do that? I wouldn't think of that. You know, John Glenn had this named after him and that named after him, a

highway named after him. What else do you want? For heaven's sake. To me, I still refer it as the Lewis [Flight Propulsion] Lab[oratory]. [Laughs]

ROSS-NAZZAL: Do you. I think a number of people still do.

DIBELLA: Well, sure they do. You ask any NACA-er, and they'll tell you. But they fought it. They tried to fight it, some of the people at Lewis. They didn't get anywhere. I don't think that's right. I really don't. They're not changing Kennedy's, are they? You know, they tried to change something over in Florida. What was it, anyway? Yes, I think they tried to—what was the—what's the address for the Kennedy Space Center nowadays? What is it?

ROSS-NAZZAL: I think it's just Cape Canaveral, Florida.

DIBELLA: Canaveral, Cape Canaveral. That's what it is, Cape Canaveral. It's not Cape Kennedy. Cape Canaveral.

ROSS-NAZZAL: Let me ask you a couple more questions about NACA—

DIBELLA: Go ahead.

ROSS-NAZZAL: —and then I wanted to ask you a couple of questions about the transition to NASA. But if you had to look back over your time at NACA, could you point to something and say that that was your most significant accomplishment while working there?

DIBELLA: The whole ten years were. The whole time I worked. When I first went in '42 until the time we became '58, they were perfect. Great days to work, yes. I can tell you that those were the best days of my life, working in the government. There's nothing like it. Hey, these reunions prove it, right?

Okay, when I retired, they held a party for me in the NASA Building, okay? And I'm looking over all these people. I have to stand there and give this little speech of some sort. And I said, "I see a lot of my old NACA friends here," and I happened to mention that aloud, and then those faces lit up, you know. Well, they were. Some of them were still NASA, too, but a number of them were not working, but they were old NACA friends, and that's when I mentioned, "Oh, wouldn't it be nice to have a reunion of the old NACA people?" And that's when they badgered me to hold this first reunion, which I ran, in '76. So after that, well, you can see what's happened. I suppose my most significant accomplishment was starting the first NACA reunion. So far we've had eleven, and I hear Langley has committed to hold the next one, perhaps in two years.

ROSS-NAZZAL: Why do you think it's so important for former NACA employees to come to these reunions, and why do they come?

DIBELLA: You should have been there last night and this morning. You never heard such hilarious sounds. Last night I was standing in line, as many other people were—it was a long line—to get our pictures taken for the album, before we went in to dinner. All of a sudden there's this big man hugging the man behind me. He said, "It's been twenty years," repeating,

“It’s been twenty years, hasn’t it?” There was “Hmm,” like this. Don’t ask me. There must have been some connection, right?

When I first came there, the engineers who came on board at that time were right fresh out of college, young and eager to start their careers. Like at Langley, I understand, if there was a project to be done, nobody interfered with what they were doing. “Do you know what you’re doing? Do it.” So they did it. They weren’t told by anybody above them or anybody else what to do.

ROSS-NAZZAL: What was the relationship like between the secretaries and the engineers when you worked at NACA?

DIBELLA: [Laughs] Do you want to know if they dated and all?

ROSS-NAZZAL: Sure. Dated, played any pranks on each other.

DIBELLA: One thing they used to do, one of the Budget Officers used to have a pool every time we got checks, our checks, they’d take the numbers or something, and whatever numbers came up, that person won—well, the contribution, I guess, was a dollar; whatever they did, I don’t know; budget men did all this stuff—and would win the prize every two weeks, whenever we got paid. That was one of the things they used to do, and I guess there were others that I don’t know about. I really don’t. [Laughs]

Whenever we needed help from other Laboratories, they would send up maybe two or three girls from the Center—or I say the Laboratory—from the Laboratory to help us out with

the reports. These engineers, whenever they did any work, would write a report, and reports were called “research memorandums” or “technical notes,” and some were classified; some were not. Whenever we needed these people, they only worked a short time and then were sent back to the Lab, and we always liked when they came to help us out, you know, to relieve us of the overload that we had. That was always nice. So we got to know some of the people at the Labs; mostly women, of course, the girls, yes. I know one friend of mine who worked at NACA, Helen Williams, she had two Langley girls working, living with her in her apartment, who came from Langley Field. To this day, they are still friends with this lady.

ROSS-NAZZAL: How neat.

DIBELLA: Oh yes. They’re still in touch. It’s wonderful, isn’t it?

ROSS-NAZZAL: Yes. And did you have that same opportunity to go out to the Laboratories while you were working for NACA?

DIBELLA: Oh, no. The Laboratories, each one maybe once a year would have an inspection. They called it inspection, and they would invite industry people to come in and see what government work was being done. And whoever was assigned to work in that department, maybe the Wind Tunnel Department, maybe the shop that made all the designs and built the things, that department. But they had inspections, okay.

From Washington there was a boat that ran from Main Avenue to Old Point Comfort in Virginia. Dr. Victory would rent the boat or hire the boat or however you want to say it, the

overnight boat, invite all of the industry people and government people, officials, military and otherwise. Then he would assign the young girls who worked in the secretarial pool to be sure and be at the dock and check these people in. Well, the young girls liked that. I liked to meet all these people coming on the ship.

So Dr. Victory, the Secretary, would set this up. He would also invite some of the female employees on this list of fifty people to go. But each time he did this, he would invite the same people to attend, and we in the secretarial pool wondered, “Hey, why don’t we ever get invited to these inspections? Why is Dr. Victory always selecting the girl from Personnel, the girl from Budget Office? They get to go every year. What are they learning about this? We’re the ones who are working with the reports that these engineers send up here.” [Laughs]

One day I was called into Dr. Victory’s office to take dictation from him. I did what I had to do and then we started to talk, because it was that time that he was inviting people to come to the inspection. I said, “Dr. Victory, I understand—blah, blah, blah, blah—that you’re inviting women to the inspections. Is it possible for any of us secretaries from the pool to go down and see, see what all this is about, what we’re familiar with on paper, but that’s all? We see all this technology stuff we’re reading; we don’t know what we’re reading, to tell you the truth.” As a matter of fact, we didn’t know what we were seeing down there, either. But I said, “Wouldn’t it be nice if maybe a few of the girls from the secretarial pool could be invited to go down there?” Everybody thought that was a lot of nerve to ask the man.

But anyway, he said, “You know, you got something there.”

I said, “Okay.” A few of us girls in the secretary pool were invited to go on the ship to go down with everybody else, and no other people but invitees were able to get on the ship at that time. The boat was reserved strictly for NACA. Anyway, it was quite an experience. As a

result, Dr. Victory started inviting ladies to go to Cleveland when they had their inspection, which was okay, too. That's the way it should be. You can't send the same people all the time. They're not getting any more knowledge than we would get from the first visit.

ROSS-NAZZAL: What did you see the first time you went down?

DIBELLA: Well, you get a tour of the whole Lab. You get a tour wherever they take you. They take you through the wind tunnels, everywhere. Whatever work they were doing, it was a complete inspection of the entire area. Then they would take you to lunch. I remember when we went, at Langley this one time, we had lunch in their cafeteria. Guess who was sitting next to me? Orville Wright.

ROSS-NAZZAL: You met Orville Wright?

DIBELLA: Yes. He was sitting right next to me. We were eating together at the table. When I told them they said, "What? You were sitting next to Orville Wright?"

I said, "Sure." And do you know, at this the other night—I don't know whether you heard about it—but what is she, a grandniece or great-grandniece, happened to be here in this hotel, and she saw "NACA." Oh, well this sparked her. She came, and wouldn't you know that she is—I don't know what the relationship is, but she is related to the Wright brothers. Her son will be writing a book about the Wright brothers.

Well, when she saw "NACA," that meant something to her. It doesn't mean anything to you—well, you work for NASA, so you would know. But any ordinary people walking in the

street, “What’s NACA?” Nobody knows what NACA is, but she did. Her father was with her. We said, “Won’t you have dinner with us?” Here she was mingling around with everybody and obviously excited to be included in this unexpected encounter.

ROSS-NAZZAL: That’s nice.

DIBELLA: That was nice, yes. I know she was happy to be among us Friday night. They left Saturday morning.

ROSS-NAZZAL: When you were sitting next to Orville Wright, do you remember the conversation?

DIBELLA: No, I don’t. I don’t remember.

ROSS-NAZZAL: Let me ask you a couple of questions about the transition from NACA to NASA.

DIBELLA: Busy days. Busy, busy days. That’s all I can tell you. Let me tell you, visits up the Hill and you know. Yes.

ROSS-NAZZAL: And at this point, were you going to Capitol Hill?

DIBELLA: Oh, no. We were working at the office.

ROSS-NAZZAL: Were you typing up testimony or what sort of things were you working on?

DIBELLA: Well, Paul [G.] Dembling, who didn't come to this reunion this time, he wrote the Space Act, and we did what we had to do. There was just so much going on at that time, so much.

ROSS-NAZZAL: You were Dryden's secretary. What was your feeling when Dryden wasn't selected as the Administrator of NASA?

DIBELLA: Well, we knew the reason, we thought. It was—I don't know. I took it philosophically. I knew that politics is politics. Glennan was the Administrator. He was in touch quite often with Dr. Dryden. You know what I mean? And same way when Webb got on board. Yes. These men knew how to handle it. Yes. I guess it was sad for the family and for all of us.

ROSS-NAZZAL: So did anything change when Glennan came on board or when Webb became the Administrator?

DIBELLA: No, it was basically a very smooth transition at the time, very smooth, as far as I know.

ROSS-NAZZAL: What were some of the things that you recall Dryden was working on at that point?

DIBELLA: My soul, Dr. Dryden was working on everything international included. He was the U.S. representative for the Peaceful Uses of Outer Space in cooperation with the Russians. A meeting was scheduled in Rome, Italy, and Dr. Dryden asked me if I would like to go with him to work in the American Embassy on Via Veneto in Rome. I said, “Yes, I’d like to go.” So I went with him, and we spent ten days there.

When he was meeting with the Russians, I was doing typing along with other secretaries that were already working in the Embassy. The Russians hosted a gathering in the evening, a cocktail party, and we all went to that. I guess it was held at the Russian Embassy, I don’t know. I don’t even know where it was held.

When it was time to leave, Dr. Dryden was going back to the States. I had enough annual leave accumulated over the years—I never took leave for sick leave or anything—so I said, “Well, maybe I’ll stay a while and see a little bit of Italy,” because I’d never been over there. So the last thing he said to me when he was leaving, “Well, don’t get lost.” [Laughter]

I stayed and visited various other interesting places in Italy and Paris, and then came on home when that time was up.

ROSS-NAZZAL: Was that the first time that Dr. Dryden had invited you to go with him?

DIBELLA: Yes. There was no point in my going any other time, but that was a time when they needed a secretary. On one occasion he went to Japan with his wife. They were gone a month. He met with Japanese people he knew through NASA. I believe it was a combination work-related vacation. He worked wherever he went.

Well, let me tell you, one time he was invited to give a speech, a technical speech, in Germany. So he wrote his speech. I typed it up in rough draft and sent it to our translator to put it in German. I said, “Dr. Dryden, are you going to do this in German?”

“Well—,” you know. You didn’t have much conversation with Dryden, because he knew what he was doing. You don’t ask. What he does, he does, and you just—you know. Well, anyway, when it came time for him to give the speech, I think it was in Aachen, Germany. Anyway, it was a technical meeting. I understand that he started it in German, and he may have done the whole thing in German, if I recall. I think so. I think he did, and they were so tickled, you know, for a man who never even studied the language.

ROSS-NAZZAL: What are some of your fondest memories of Dr. Dryden?

DIBELLA: Oh, I don’t know. You knew the man as a very honest person, down-to-earth, never put on any airs. As a matter of fact, he was a lay Methodist preacher. I typed a number of his sermons; he used to deliver some beautiful sermons. And Mrs. Dryden told me that he would give sermons at this girls’ school. It wasn’t a school, it was the Florence Crittenden Home, where unwed girls lived when they got pregnant. He gave a number of sermons there. Because I kept a file on his sermons, I asked Mrs. [Mary Libbie Travers] Dryden, if Dr. Dryden ever wrote anything out.

“No,” she said. “He always talks off the cuff.” And it showed on his face. A godly person, really. You respected everything he did. He used to come up to my desk, and he’d talk to me. While he was talking to me, he was reading whatever papers were on my desk upside down from his view. Incredible!

Today I could write his signature. I used to write some of the—I didn't want to write on the [program]; oh yes, it's all right. [Writes]

ROSS-NAZZAL: So you didn't have stamps for signatures back then?

DIBELLA: No indeed. This is his signature.

ROSS-NAZZAL: I'm going to have to go to the archives and put that piece of paper up against a letter. [Laughs]

DIBELLA: Well, you want to do that? You could do that. That's how he wrote. Crowley and the other boss I had, he was—[writes]. That's Crowley. Hey, I wrote to Helen Smith, the secretary before me, and I said, "Helen, do you recognize this?" She lives in Ohio.

"Where did you get that?"

I told her I had written it.

"Oh, for heaven's sake."

Sometimes I would sign letters that were not very important if he wasn't available to do so. "Do you want me to sign that for you?" And, of course, I put the little "J. D." down there to make sure.

ROSS-NAZZAL: When Dr. Dryden wasn't there, what were some of the tasks that you would work on while he was out of town?

DIBELLA: There was always a lot of work to do, even if he wasn't there. Work always came through the desk all the time. And when he got sick, I used to go to the NIH, (National Institutes of Health), hospital unit in Bethesda, Maryland. I used to take the latest mail; he wanted that. He wanted to write, sign his name to the letters, and anything that was official, of course, I took out, and he signed them. He wanted to read them all, keep him up to date on what was going on at the office when he was hospitalized. It was very sad.

ROSS-NAZZAL: You must have had a very strong bond, a very strong relationship.

DIBELLA: Oh yes. Yes. His wife often said, "I so appreciate your taking care of my husband."

I would keep people from going into his office. I'd close the door. He needed that privacy.

Have you got this on?

ROSS-NAZZAL: Yes. Do you want me to take it off.

DIBELLA: Yes. Well, I won't tell you this. It's all right. But I would try to keep people from going in there, because I knew that he was suffering. He was suffering so much. He had two doors; one led to the inner sanctum, you know what I mean? I often heard him go in there to go to the bathroom. Poor guy. I'd see him sitting at his desk. Because I think maybe the pressure from the cancer was getting to him so much.

ROSS-NAZZAL: Let me just ask you a couple more questions. I don't want to take up too much of your time.

DIBELLA: Yes, you ask me questions; let me tell you all these details.

ROSS-NAZZAL: Who would often come by Dr. Dryden's office? Anyone from the administration or from other agencies?

DIBELLA: People? He never turned anybody down, never. No matter, he saw them all. He wouldn't refuse anybody, anytime. He always had time for whoever wanted to see him, not only adults but youngsters too. When work came in, it didn't sit this high on his desk. [Demonstrates] He'd look at it, [gestures], or put it aside to answer, always. He did things [snaps fingers], pretty darn quick. Never anything backlogged. No backlog, no anything, and read—he could go through mail with uncanny speed. It takes something to read fast. I don't read fast, myself; I don't know about you.

His English was impeccable. Grammar, impeccable. You couldn't find fault with his English. Punctuation, he'd do everything, and he wouldn't dictate. He wrote, wrote out in his little old handwriting, the little I showed you. But he wrote. He liked to write things out himself. Incredible. Incredible person. You just can't—spiritually and intelligent, my god. He knew everything. He liked mystery books.

ROSS-NAZZAL: He did?

DIBELLA: Yes, and one of the gals, Helen Frye [phonetic], she read a lot of mysteries, and she supplied him sometimes with mysteries. He liked mystery books.

You like to know about him, maybe—I should have told you—maybe you should meet Michael [H.] Gorn and see what he's got on his tape.

ROSS-NAZZAL: Sure. Sure. Well, and I can forward him a copy of this as well, if you'd like.

DIBELLA: Well, anyway, I don't know. I don't know whether I told him as much as I told you. He asked different questions. Go ahead.

ROSS-NAZZAL: Any other anecdotes or memories that you recall?

DIBELLA: About him, you mean?

ROSS-NAZZAL: Yes.

DIBELLA: Helen, his former secretary, told me when I went up to talk to her when she knew I was going to take the job, "Well, you'll find out," she said, "that Dr. Dryden wears one suit a week, and the next week he'll wear something else. You'll notice that."

I said, "Oh, Helen. Oh, okay." He wasn't a flashy dresser, like some men are. They have the right tie and—no, he wasn't flashy at all.

He had a very faithful driver who chauffeured him home, got him to work and home. John Freeman [phonetic] was his driver, black man, who also said to me, "Hey, Jo, one of these

days,” he said, “I’m going to dance at your wedding. Don’t forget.” He even told me that when I retired.

I said, “Yes, John, you’ll dance at—.” I never married, so never got the chance.
[Laughter]

ROSS-NAZZAL: That’s nice.

DIBELLA: Yes. He was a very nice person. He was so fond of Dr. Dryden, and Dr. Dryden always called him “John,” you know, just “John.” Very nice. And so, what else?

ROSS-NAZZAL: Well, I think we’ve pretty much covered everything. I’m just curious if you have anything else you’d like to say.

DIBELLA: I don’t have anything. I went overboard, I think, in telling you [things].

ROSS-NAZZAL: Well, I certainly appreciate your time today, and I’ve enjoyed hearing your stories and learning more about Headquarters.

DIBELLA: Because I couldn’t answer all those things that they had in that sheet that I received from Rebecca [Wright].

ROSS-NAZZAL: Oh, sure.

DIBELLA: Forget it. I couldn't answer any of those questions. Those are technical things, you know. I didn't know anything about technical work.

ROSS-NAZZAL: Well, you've given me some good social history, I think.

DIBELLA: But that's about it, you know.

ROSS-NAZZAL: That's important. I can't stress that enough.

DIBELLA: Well, you know, when you're happy in your daily life, going to work in any kind of weather, and, hey, and so happy to be there, to show up, you know.

One time the circus train went through from Union Station. Like if you looked out here, maybe a block away was the railroad tracks going south to Florida. Dr. Dryden had a visitor in his office at that moment. I looked back when I heard the trains, and I thought, "Oh, that's the circus train." It was a long one; each car had open slats with animals you could see. I don't know whether you ever saw that. But anyway, I rang him. I said, "Dr. Dryden, the circus train is going south. You can see it from your office, going down the tracks."

He and the fellow got up, went to the other end of the room just to watch the whole train go by. He appreciated that. [Laughs]

ROSS-NAZZAL: Very funny.

DIBELLA: He was just like a kid, you know what I mean? That was fun.

ROSS-NAZZAL: Well, I thank you again.

[End of interview]