Interview with **Robert Coomer**

HP-A-L-2010-026

Interview # 1: June 17, 2010

Interviewer: Julie Dirksen

Dirksen: Alright, Bob, its just so nice being here with you today; I'm looking forward to this.

Coomer: I am as well, Julie

Dirksen: Oh, good. We're going to just talk over a little bit of background information so that they can have this on the oral history component. What I would like to do is just take a few minutes and talk about you. You live here in Springfield.

Coomer: Yes.

Dirksen: And how long have you lived here in Springfield?

Coomer: I've lived in Springfield probably since the early 1980s. I grew up in the Springfield area and it was what I know as home; it was the rural area for the most part.

Dirksen: Uh huh.

Coomer: The Springfield area is what I've always considered to be home.

Dirksen: Great. And Deb is your wife.

Coomer: Yes.

Dirksen: And she also works at IHPA, right?

Coomer: She did. She worked as an accountant in the Historic Sites Division.

Dirksen: Isn't that great?

Coomer: Yes.

Dirksen: So you guys could never get away from work.

Coomer: (both laugh) We were never too far away from one another.

Dirksen: And you attended Athens High School.

Coomer: Yes.

Dirksen: And then went on to Western and got your degree in Parks and Recreation Administration.

Coomer: I did. I went to Western in 1964. I worked my way through school, ran out of money, and it was right in the era of Viet Nam. I went to school for a year. I was ready to go back to school. Got my draft notice. I made my case that I was going back to school. They said that you've been in and out of school, for financial reasons, but they basically said, if your number's called you're going to be drafted. So rather than leave my fate in Uncle Sam's hands, I decided to join the Air Force, which I did. And I was really glad that I did. I was in the Air Force for four years and it actually ended up paying for my college education. I'm not sure I would have had a college education were it not for the military. So I then graduated from Western. I went back with a new attitude, new priorities, but graduated from Western in 1971.

Dirksen: How did you pick Parks and Recreation?

Coomer: I got interested in it, actually, when I was in the service and I thought about being involved with the YMCA or something of that nature. I almost took a job down in North Carolina as soon as I got out of the service running a YMCA, and I decided that if I was going to get an education, I'd better do it at that time or I probably would never do it. So I went back with an interest of doing administrative work in either a private or a commercial sector or not-for-profit and chose Park and Recreations as my field of interest. I graduated from Western. They had the equivalent of a student teacher and I did my field work with the Champaign Park District, and while there, I then applied for a National Recreation and Park Association internship. They only do maybe five or six people a year, and I was selected and did it with the Champaign Park District. And being in Champaign when I finished, I went then to the University of Illinois and got my Master's Degree in Parks and Recreation Administration.

Dirksen: Wow. You really have wonderful experience to put you into the career that you ultimately ended up in.

Coomer: You never know how it's going to play, but I had a background and I had work experience in the area. I don't know how the sequence goes, but history wasn't my interest. I always liked history, but when I went to work for the Department of Conservation, I worked in the Bureau of Lands and Historic Sites, and the job that I really wanted, or aspired to have if I was lucky enough, was to end up being the Superintendent of Parks for the Department of Conservation.

Dirksen: Alright, now, wait a minute, because we're getting ahead. That's exactly what I want; I want you to say all these things, but we need to do a little bit more how you got to that point.

Coomer: Okay. Sure.

Dirksen: Because I do want us to bring this up. Well, when you started in your professional career, is that what you had planned to do, or were you just then planning to do something in parks and recreation as far as, obviously administration, because that's what you got your degree in?

Coomer: Yeah. There were a lot of [parks], especially around the Chicago area, and the bigger Illinois cities where they had pretty strong parks and recreation departments, and parks was really taking off at about that point in time. I really thought I would end up running, or I was hoping to run a park district somewhere.

Dirksen: Uh huh.

Coomer: And when I graduated from Illinois, I almost took a job in a small town up in northern Illinois, Cary, Illinois. I had the opportunity to go to work there and be the general manager of their new park district, and I really didn't feel like I had the experience to do that; so I chose a job, I went over to Dayton, Ohio, with the Montgomery County Parks and Recreation Department. But I really thought what I ultimately wanted to end up doing would be, probably being in charge of a park district in a community somewhere.

Dirksen: Well, only you were in charge of all the parks (both laugh) in the community of Illinois.

Coomer: It's strange how things play out.

Dirksen: I know.

Coomer: But it got very close to that. Yes.

Dirksen: It was. That is amazing. Well, of course, like you have said, your early career really was doing a lot with parks and doing things with managing, which just kind of all plays with your love and your interest and certainly your

education. But, how in the world did you start then with the Department of Conservation?

Coomer: I had been the Director of Recreation over in Columbus, Indiana.

Dirksen: Now what year was that?

Coomer: That would have been probably ’76 to about ’78, somewhere in that vicinity. And I don’t believe it was a decision to, quote, come back home. There weren’t a lot of job opportunities in that particular field in this immediate central Illinois area.

Dirksen: Uh huh.

Coomer: I was able to secure a job with the Department of Conservation and it was close to what I wanted to do, but it was starting out really at an entry level. I started out at assisting the Bureau Chief for the Department of Conservation, Bureau of Lands and Historic Sites.

Dirksen: What year was that?

Coomer: That was 1979. And I served as his administrative assistant and I did that for two years.

Dirksen: Now who was that?

Coomer: That was Charles Tamminga. He was the bureau chief with the Department of Conservation, Bureau of Lands and Historic Sites. And I worked with him more than anyone else, but I also worked with Ray Norbut, and Ray Norbut was the Superintendent of Parks. I would say both of those gentlemen served as [mentors]. Ray especially was one of the people that taught me a lot, was my mentor.

Dirksen: I noticed that you had his name here as a mentor for you. Did he ultimately then go on to become the public superintendent?

Coomer: He was Superintendent of Parks, Public Lands at the time that I was serving as an assistant. Ray was one of those people that started out with conservation, Department of Conservation, probably Department of Public Works at that time, as a truck driver, right out of high school, and literally worked his way to becoming Superintendent of Public Lands. And was a dinosaur of sorts. I mean, he managed by the old book, and that was his style.

Dirksen: Uh huh.

Coomer: But he also was very, very, very smart, very intelligent and world wise and, there were times I would say, “Ray, how do you know how you’re going to

deal with something like that?" He'd say, "Bob, there's nothing new. I've seen it all at least once or twice before, especially with state government."

Dirksen: Was the Department of Conservation already a state agency?

Coomer: It was.

Dirksen: And it came from the Department of Public Works?

Coomer: The original, I think everything at that point and time associated with what we knew as the Department of Conservation, public lands, state parks, fish and wildlife areas, historic sites, was all under the Department of Public Works.

Dirksen: And that was a state agency?

Coomer: That was a state agency. And it was like an umbrella, and they talk about consolidation?

Dirksen: Uh huh.

Coomer: It was like this has all happened before.

Dirksen: Right.

Coomer: It all started out that way under Department of PublicWorks and then it went out to different departments and different agencies, but when they talked about consolidation, it's a movement back towards that umbrella of everything being under one entity. I don't know when Department of Conservation begins, but it started as the Department of Public Works, because there were some old badges that were Department of Public Works that were a part of people's recollections and so forth. And then it became the Department of Conservation, which later after we had left, became the Department of Natural Resources. But we were in the Bureau of Public Lands and Historic Sites, we being Historic Sites. So I worked with Ray Norbut and with Charles Tamminga for two years as their assistant. The person who was the superintendent of historic sites, basically, they chose to move him out of that job.

Dirksen: Uh huh.

Coomer: The job opened up. There were a number of people who applied for the job. Chuck Tamminga, the bureau chief said, "Why didn't you apply for the job?" I said, "Well, I'm not a historian." He said, "I'm not looking for a historian. I'm looking for a manager." He said, "You've got Ph.D.'s over there that can tell you all the history you need to know, but I'm looking for someone who can be a supervisor, can be a manager." And he said, "You ought to consider that." Then he went on to tell me, "It would be good training for what you hope to be," Superintendent of Parks.

Dirksen: Right.

Coomer: Because he said, "There's a lot of similarities. It would just be a great experience for you." So I said, "Consider me applying for it."

Dirksen: Now what year would that have been?

Coomer: That would have been 1981.

Dirksen: Okay.

Coomer: And I was selected to serve as the Superintendent of Historic Sites.

Dirksen: In the Department of Conservation.

Coomer: In the Department of Conservation. Yeah. It was still in the Bureau of Lands and Historic Sites under DOC at that point.

Dirksen: So then, here you are, you're all going along, everything is okay, and then what happened in 1984-85, when they said no, we're going to make this, you know, totally pull this away and create this.

Coomer: Yeah. Sounds corny, but the angel of history appeared on the scene and that angel of history was Julie Cellini.

Dirksen: Uh huh.

Coomer: And Julie, I mean, nobody sat down and told me how this all transpired. I had the opportunity to meet with Julie Cellini and Sally Schaumbacher who were both trustees and served on the board for the Illinois Historical Library, and they were talking about the program.

Dirksen: And this is when Thompson was governor.

Coomer: James Thompson was governor. They were very, very passionate about the history of Illinois. They were concerned for the program at the Old State Capitol, and they knew of some of our programs over in conservation, New Salem was an example, and that we had gotten volunteers involved. Julie was really interested about how to grow the program at the Old State Capitol, and we talked. She literally came to my office with Sally, and we sat down and talked about what we were doing and I think it gave her ideas about what, perhaps, they could be doing at the Old State Capitol. And I just feel very strongly that Julie had an influence in creating the new agency. She had the interest and the influence to pull Illinois history together, and I think there was discussion with Governor Thompson about the possibility of putting the Division f Historic Sites with the Illinois Historical Library and Governor Thompson, of course, loved history, was a collector, and passionate about history. He came to a lot of our sites, participated in many of our events and

programs, and I think he saw the merit, and the next thing I was told is that next fiscal year there's going to be a new agency and the Division of Historic Sites is going to be formed with the Illinois Historical Library to create this new agency. And I had real trepidation.

Dirksen: I was going to say, what would that have been like because how many historic sites did you have in the Department of Conservation at that time?

Coomer: Number, approximately, I'd say somewhere around eighteen, nineteen sites.

Dirksen: Historic sites.

Coomer: Were historic sites.

Dirksen: That's in addition to the parks and everything else.

Coomer: Yes. Parks was something else. At that point, in the Bureau of Lands and Historic Sites there were various divisions. The Division of Public Lands was broken into five regions throughout the state, and then in addition to that, there was a Division of Historic Sites which was state-inclusive. There were three district historians that kind of broke up the state, thus provide support for the sites in that particular region.

Dirksen: So the Department of Conservation had historians on staff?

Coomer: Yes. There were three district historians and it was broken down to the northern, central and southern.

Coomer: And the sites in those particular regions reported to that district historian. The district historian reported to the division chief or the Superintendent of Historic Sites, which, at that point was me. And I in turn reported to Chuck Tamminga. So, that was the physical set-up at that point.

Dirksen: You did not handle the State Capitol?

Coomer: Didn't have the Old State Capitol. Dirksen: Because that was part of…?

Coomer: The Illinois Historical Library.

Dirksen: Historical Library. Right.

Coomer: Right. There were three sites in the Historical Library, beyond the library itself. They were the Old State Capitol, which was the big one; the Davis mansion up in Bloomington; and the Carl Sandburg home up in Galesburg. So they were the three sites that were being run as public sites by the Historical Library.

Dirksen: So, for instance, the New Salem would have been in the Department of Conservation?

Coomer: Yes, yes, right.

Dirksen: And some of the other sites that were so familiar, like Cahokia.

Coomer: Cahokia Mounds.

Dirksen: Cahokia Mounds.

Coomer: Fort de Chartres, Fort Kaskaskia, Lincoln Log Cabin, Douglas Tomb, Postville, Mt. Pulaski, Bishop Hill, Galena complex.

Dirksen: So when you were with the Department of Conservation, did you do preservation, too?

Coomer: Yes.

Dirksen: Or were you just maintenance?

Coomer: No. The Division of Historic Sites had components. One of the components was land management or site management, so all the sites around the State of Illinois were in the Division of Historic Sites. Then the National Register program and the preservation program, the compliance, the review and compliance program, were a part of the division, as well. And then there was the opportunity to provide outside assistance where we could, within our resources, in the way of preservation, much like what HPA does today.

Dirksen: Uh huh.

Coomer: So all that component was really a part of the Division of Historic Sites, not the Historical Library. The Historical Library was really those three sites plus the Historical Library, the State Historical Library.

Dirksen: And so then you had site managers and you would have staff there, right?

Coomer: Right, yes.

Dirksen: Okay. So then they started working on this and talking about it and you were brought in at that point for discussion. Did you think this was going to happen?

Coomer: Yeah, at that point it was far enough along that I was pretty sure that it was going to happen. As I say, I had some trepidation.

Dirksen: Uh huh.

Coomer: And there were site managers who were very concerned. It was the state, the unknown, you know, there's always the question of the unknown. And it was going to be, here I go, I mean, this is where you can clean me up, but (Dirksen laughs) we were like the step-child in the Department of Conservation.

Dirksen: Because their focus…?

Coomer: Their focus was parks, fish, wildlife, forestry, fisheries and trails.

Dirksen: Right.

Coomer: That was the real focus of conservation and then there was Historic Sites.

Dirksen: Uh huh.

Coomer: I wouldn't say that we were mistreated, but we weren't the priority. Let's just put it that way. We were not the priority. We were the small fish in the big pond.

Dirksen: Literally.

Coomer: Literally. (Dirksen laughs). Literally. That's a good way to put it, I think. And while we knew what that was, it was there. We had support from the other components of conservation, conservation police officers, the planning and design that oversaw capital programs, all those components were built into conservation and we had that support at conservation.

Dirksen: But not the focus.

Coomer: We were not the focus. Absolutely not. So, the idea of moving away from that support service and the consistency of having a fairly steady experience, background, not knowing what the new thing was going to be, there was anxiety.

Dirksen: Uh huh.

Coomer: And especially by a lot of the managers. When it was going to happen, you just have to accept it and move forward. And my job then was to try to make it happen and make it happen with taking away as much anxiety as you can and, at the same time, still trying to accomplish the same thing that we had always been trying to accomplish, preserving those resources and developing programs so that people could learn about those particular sites. That focus didn't change, so we just had to emphasize that and carry that forward when the new agency came to be.

Dirksen: And that was 1985?

Coomer: 1985. And, how it happened, I didn't sit at the table when these decisions were being made. They were being made at a higher level by the higher [offices]; by the Director of Conservation, the bureau chief and the governor's office were literally making these decisions. I don't know what role the Historical Library trustees played in it. I'm sure they played an active role.

Dirksen: Yes.

Coomer: I told people it was like all the historic sites were put on the table that was historic sites and then everybody was trying to pull parts in their direction. There was interest by conservation of making the case for Lincoln's New Salem and Fort Kaskaskia and Nauvoo and some of the sites that had more than just historical resource to remain with conservation.

Dirksen: They had land.

Coomer: Those sites had land. They had parks. They had trails. They had fishing ponds. You know, all kinds of things along that line, so Conservation was making the case that those things should stay in Conservation. And at the same time I was trying to make the case that those sites' emphasis was the historic resource and they should be coming to the new agency. Ultimately, the decision was made and when it was made, I looked at all the sites that were being run by the division in conservation that were Historic Sites, and I said, "All those sites should transfer." You know, they've been a part of Historic Sites. They should all transfer. Well, that wasn't the case.

Dirksen: Hmm.

Coomer: There were four sites, Blackhawk, Nauvoo, Jubilee College and Fort Massac that stayed in Conservation.

Dirksen: Because of the land?

Coomer: Because of the land and the emphasis, I guess, maybe what would appear to be, maybe the priority of what was happening at those particular sites.

Dirksen: Uh huh.

Coomer: And they included parks. Blackhawk, you know, had the resource of…

Dirksen: Now where is Blackhawk?

Coomer: Blackhawk is in Rock Island. It is one of the busiest city parks in Rock Island, still today. But it existed because of the experiences associated with Blackhawk and the Sauk-Fox Americans, and that was their location. That was the village of the Sauk and the Fox and the Indian habitat was there in that particular area. So, it existed because of its historic significance, but in addition to that, it was a very much an urban park. And so, Conservation was

saying, "We're going to hold onto that." But they were making the case for New Salem, as well, because it was a popular site. Those four were very attractive sites. There was a lot of attendance at these sites and it was a matter of whose going to end up with them. So, those four sites, literally, stayed with Conservation when the new agency was formed.

Dirksen: And they still are.

Coomer: No. We made the case, and we being I really got involved, because I believed in it passionately and we were able to get Jubilee College and Blackhawk transferred to IHPA.

Dirksen: And Jubilee College is where, Bob?

Coomer: Jubilee is just outside Brimfield, Illinois, about fifteen miles northwest of Peoria. And there's now a Jubilee College State Historic Site, which is about eighty-four acres and then there's Jubilee College State Park. So they got separated. So we got a part of it and part of it stayed with Conservation.

Dirksen: Okay.

Coomer: And that was the case with Fort Massac, same situation. We had the fort area and then there was the state park. Well, we didn't get Fort Massac, we didn't get Nauvoo, but we ended up getting Blackhawk and getting Jubilee College. But, here's the other example. There was a site down in southern Illinois; I mean it's literally where the Ohio and the Mississippi come together. There is a site there called Fort Defiance. Well, there's nothing historic —associated with the site.

Dirksen: Is that where the rivers all converge?

Coomer: That's the convergent point.

Dirksen: Right.

Coomer: And, actually, what was Fort Defiance historically; if you were to do the archeology, it's somewhere in the middle of the Mississippi River, but because of the siltation, it's moved now from what was the convergence point. But there's no fort; there's nothing there anymore, and it's a site that is extremely hard to manage. It floods routinely.

Dirksen: And you wanted that?

Coomer: No, we didn't want it. (Dirksen laughs) But, Conservation thought of it as an opportunity to get rid of it. So, when the agency was created, Fort Defiance came to the new agency.

Dirksen: So, did you say, I'll do that if you give me New Salem?

Coomer: (Both laugh) Yeah, it was bartering. But it ultimately came out that most of the sites of the division transferred to the new agency and it came to be what is known now as the Division of Historic Sites. But not all of them. You know, it was interesting to see it all play out. I'd say I was passionate about getting some of those sites back, literally worked with the local legislators and made the case for the history associated with those sites. And I guess Representative Turke who served the Peoria area believed in the history and he did a lot to get the legislation to transfer Jubilee College to the new agency. And that was the same case with Blackhawk. We got virtually the political support to get Blackhawk moved from Conservation to the new agency. We were also successful in getting Fort Defiance moved back to Conservation. We didn't have anything in that area to manage it. It virtually got picked up by one of the state parks nearby and it continues to be a part of the Department of Natural Resources. But it was interesting, the dynamics of this.

Dirksen: I can't imagine. I mean, knowing how state government is. First of all, to be dividing it up like that and working and then now you are creating. Okay, so now, it has been named a separate agency and it's been named Illinois Historic Preservation Agency.

Coomer: Yes.

Dirksen: You are the Superintendent or the Director of Historic Sites. What is your exact title then?

Coomer: I was Superintendent of Historic Sites.

Dirksen: Okay. Who was the first director then of the agency?

Coomer: The first Director of Illinois Historic Preservation Agency (IHPA) was Dr. David Kenney. Dr. Kenney had previously been Director of Conservation.

Dirksen: Was he a historian?

Coomer: Yes,, he had been a professor from SIU, Carbondale.

Dirksen: Okay.

Coomer: But he had served for several years as the Director of Conservation.

Dirksen: Really?

Coomer: Yes. And when the agency was created, Governor Thompson named Director Kenney as the new Director of IHPA. So he came, virtually, with the division and I took a lot of trips with Director Kenney about the foresight of how do we move forward and, how do we make this thing work.

Dirksen: Right. That's my question, because here you are, you know. You were very lucky that they had you, because you had the credibility with all the historic sites. You had the knowledge. You had the people. They knew you, so there was a huge trust level there, which was needed. So, what did he do?

Coomer: Director Kenney, in my opinion, relied very heavily on his bureau chiefs and his division managers to run the day-to-day functions.

Dirksen: How did they, then, start the agency? Because, I mean, the agency was really started to bring all the historic sites together. So, whose background and whose knowledge was it then, that as IHPA, we're also going to do this. For instance, like right now we do Main Street. They don't have Main Street back then.

Coomer: The infancy of Main Street was actually moving forward at that point.

Dirksen: It was?

Coomer: Uh huh.

Dirksen: Okay.

Coomer: It's interesting, Julie, because I recall meeting with a gentleman who oversaw the fiscal program for Conservation, for all of Conservation. His name was Roy Miller. When it was actually determined that the agency was going to be created and it was no longer going to be a part of Conservation, how do we break out that component of the budget of Conservation and move it to historic, this new agency?

Dirksen: Right.

Coomer: Again, it was that matter of Conservation trying to hold on as much as it could.

Dirksen: Uh huh.

Coomer: And IHPA was not really knowing what all was needed. As an example, we had the support services in Conservation, who were not a part of the division, but that wasn't in the new agency per se.

Dirksen: Right.

Coomer: Example. When there was a law problem in a park at a historic site, the Conservation police officers were the governing force.

Dirksen: Oh, wow.

Coomer: Well, none of that transferred to the new agency. The design and planning component of Conservation was a bureau. None of that really transferred to the new agency short of having a Saturday sit-down meeting with Roy Miller, saying, "Okay, how this is going to happen."

Dirksen: Going back to Roy, how can you help us?

Coomer: Exactly. And Roy Miller….

Dirksen: Who was one of your mentors?

Coomer: No, I wouldn't say Roy was a mentor.

Dirksen: Oh, I thought you did, I'm sorry.

Coomer: Roy and I didn't always (Dirksen laughs) necessarily agree, so I wouldn't say he was a mentor, but he was trying to do the right thing.

Dirksen: Uh huh.

Coomer: Because while there was some mentality that Conservation was going to hold onto as much as it possibly could. Let the new fledgling agency go off and create its own.

Dirksen: Right.

Coomer: Roy was trying to do what I would say was the right thing.

Dirksen: Oh, good.

Coomer: So we sat down and tried to work out the budget. As I said, Roy called me and he said, "Bob, can you come in so we can sit down and work this out?" And I was concerned because I didn't think anybody was doing that and it turns out there wasn't anybody really doing that. So we sat down and we talked about what component of the budget fiscal dollars that was needed to operate, and how that was going to transfer through the legislative process so that the appropriation came forward to the new agency. Another thing we did get was one of the people that worked in the Bureau of Planning and Design. His name was Ed Keating He came to the new agency. Short of that, we didn't really gain anything other than the operating dollars. And there was capital money, you know, projects that needed to come forward out of Conservation for the new agency, and just before all this happened, there was a new program in Conservation. It was the Park and Conservation Fund, and it was a new tax, the soda pop tax. There was a tax on beverages, soft drinks, and that money went to the Parks and Conservation Fund. Well, being part of the Bureau of Lands and Historic Sites, we had some projects that were going forward that were funded by the Park and Conservation Fund. So we had to make the case that some of that money should come to the new agency. And,

in fact, we were successful. The visitor center is an example at New Salem, Bishop Hill, Cahokia Mounds and the reconstruction of the wall down at Fort de Chartres; they were all funded out of Parks and Conservation Fund. So we were making the case that those funds needed to come to the new agency, as well. Roy concurred with that, and in fact, those funds were transferred. If it would have been left on the table and that meeting hadn't taken place with Roy Miller, none of that money would have come to the new agency, I don't believe.

Dirksen: Uh huh.

Coomer: It would have taken a legislative act after the fact to have made that happen. Fortunately, we had good trustees that were in there fighting for us, as well.

Dirksen: That would have been Julie and Sally Schaumbacher and Frank Mason.

Coomer: The three of them.

Dirksen: Right.

Coomer: The three of them. And, as I say, they just went over and above and beyond, you know. They weren't just a figurehead board. They got involved and they fought the fight and went forward and made the case. They worked tirelessly to make sure that the agency had the best chance of success by making the case for the things that they were hearing.

Dirksen: Well now, where was the agency located then, at that time? I mean when you first started.

Coomer: Prior to, we were, literally, on the corner of Fourth and Washington, 405 Washington.

Dirksen: Uh huh.

Coomer: And we were on the third floor of that corner building, which was where the division was. When we were moved to the new agency, we were on South Sixth Street; I forget the address. I think it was 212, like second or third level of a building there over a camera shop.

Dirksen: Right.

Coomer: It was where we were physically located. Sometime after that, the division moved to the Journal-Register building when the agency rented the Journal-Register building. We purchased and rehabbed the second floor enough so we could move into it and the division moved into the old Journal-Register building which still serves as the center for the agency's administration.

Dirksen: So here you start… there wouldn't have been many people, though, in administration at that time, when you start in '85.

Coomer: No.

Dirksen: So you had, what?

Coomer: We were fairly small.

Dirksen: I would say two or three of you.

Coomer: There was a handful.

Dirksen: Uh huh.

Coomer: We had an accounting function. We had a history component that was virtually Dick Taylor and a staff of three.

Dirksen: So they've been involved since then.

Coomer: Yes.

Dirksen: Wow.

Coomer: Dick goes back to being a part of the Division of Historic Sites under Conservation.

Dirksen: Okay.

Coomer: And virtually, they worked with the sites to develop the interpretative programs, the history, you know, what we were talking in the way of the history associated with the site.

Dirksen: Uh huh.

Coomer: Those components were in place and were a part of the administrative function. Then I worked very closely with the sites regarding day-to-day operations.

Dirksen: Uh huh. That's what I always have heard that about you, how you were so much involved with the sites.

Coomer: It was easy, Julie, because it was a passion. I mean, I'll go back, and I wrote it down for you, but I said earlier as we were talking, the job that I wanted was to be the superintendent of parks.

Dirksen: Uh huh.

Coomer: I grew to love the job that I was doing. And I told people I couldn't have afforded to, but I would have done the job for nothing. I mean, I really grew to love the job, because I like the history part of it, I like the parks part of it, but more than that, I really grew to really like the people who were at the sites doing the program. They're passionate. They go above and beyond to do a job. And that was the success that we experienced with the people out there literally doing their job. I grew to really like those people to the point, when that job opened up and Ray Norbut retired, and the superintendent of parks job opened up, I didn't even think twice about it. I didn't apply for it, because I really liked what I was doing.

Dirksen: You did not want to go back

Coomer: No, I didn't, I didn't. I liked the job I was doing.

Dirksen: To Conservation? Plus this was so exciting because you were creating this whole new agency and doing all these things?

Coomer: And that, I was so lucky in being able to do that. If I were to sum up my career, I was one of those people, as they say, lucky enough to be in the right place at the right time.

Dirksen: Uh huh.

Coomer: And when all this happened and I got to be a part of it, it's like being a father. I mean, there are times you don't always agree with your kids, but, in general, I felt that way. I had a family feeling about what we had become. And we were all in it together. We'd gone through a very traumatic time of moving from something that we knew to something that we didn't know.

Dirksen: How did they handle that? I mean, again, it was because of you, too, Bob. I mean they trusted you so implicitly.

Coomer: No, I can't say that.

Dirksen: Well now, did you have many drop out?

Coomer: I had one, the guy at Nauvoo. He didn't want to roll the dice and move. I mean, he was fighting hard to stay in Conservation. And he did.

Dirksen: Uh huh.

Coomer: I was lucky enough, yeah; I guess, they cast their fate, all of us cast our fate together.

Dirksen: Right.

Coomer: And we were in it together and then that created that sense of unity that I guess I'm expressing to you.

Dirksen: Uh huh.

Coomer: We did it. We survived it. And because of them, I think we were successful. You know, I think we had a very successful program.

Dirksen: Well look at the agency now. I mean, you were able to because you were the bedrock of the agency. I mean, after all, the historic sites.

Coomer: Again, I was lucky enough to be in the right place at the right time. Yes. It wasn't me, Julie.

Dirksen: Well, no, it was a lot of people. No, no, no, no. I don't mean that, right. I know exactly what you're saying, but you were an integral part of it. So then, the director, Kenney, didn't stay that long.

Coomer: No, he wasn't there long.

Dirksen: No.

Coomer: He got at odds at a higher level.

Dirksen: Uh huh.

Coomer: And I think it was determined that for the agency to move forward there really needed to be a new director. Director Kenney served in that capacity, probably—time fails me—but I would say less than six months.

Dirksen: Oh, wow.

Coomer: Less than six months.

Dirksen: Yeah. That isn't very long, right. And so, then the next director was, I have it written down here.

Coomer: Dr. Michael Devine.

Dirksen: He was there a while.

Coomer: He was there a while.

Dirksen: Uh huh. Now did he have a background in…?

Coomer: He had a Ph.D. in history.

Dirksen: History.

Coomer: From Ohio State University. He was an Illinois guy. He grew up in the Joliet area, and had a Ph.D. in history from Ohio State.

Dirksen: So he brought what to the agency?

Coomer: I wasn't real close with Director Devine. I think Director Devine had a scholarly interest for how the agency should move forward. He didn't get very much involved with historic sites. I think his real interest seemed to be the library, the historical library. I think he had a scholarly approach to management.

Dirksen: Uh huh.

Coomer: I don't think he had, and here's where you need to bleep me, probably (Dirksen laughs). I don't think he had a clue politically how things functioned. Example, he just felt that things should be the way that they should be and the political process had no involvement. And you can't have that attitude as a state agency.

Dirksen: No.

Coomer: Not when you're dependent upon the legislature appropriating your annual budget. Because of his conflict with the legislature, the agency's budget was reduced to one dollar in an appropriation hearing.

Dirksen: What? How can that be?

Coomer: They were making a point, that you've got to work with us. And he really didn't; I don't think he ever got it, that he had to work with the political process. You know, it was like it shouldn't be, didn't have to be and therefore, wasn't going to be. And it doesn't work that way.

Dirksen: Well how could you run? How could you do the whole thing?

Coomer: Well, fortunately, again, I'm talking about the trustees.

Dirksen: Uh huh. They were able to come back.

Coomer: They were able to cover up that blunder. That lasted one day. The message was being sent. I don't know if Mike really got it. I don't know if Director Devine ever fully got caught on.

Dirksen: Uh huh.

Coomer: But the ill feeling was taken care of by, again, a couple, what I believe, I don't know this for a fact, but I think our trustees intervened.

Dirksen: Your angels.

Coomer: Our angels, our angels that were looking over us intervened and, you know, were able to get the appropriations put back to the point where it was needed to be.

Dirksen: That's a great story.

Coomer: And I'm saying that's my take on it. I don't know all. I wasn't directly involved with it other than I was a part of the appropriations hearing. I know that it happened. I don't know how it got corrected. I know that it got corrected. I don't think Mike got it corrected. I think somebody beyond Mike got it corrected. I don't know that, so that's where you take this for what its worth. That's my take on it. But that, to me, was the downside to Director Devine was. While I think he cared about the agency, while he cared about especially the library, while he had the scholarly background for it, I don't think he ever got a clue about the political side of what the agency's needs were.

Dirksen: Or day-to-day operations.

Coomer: Yeah. I really don't. I really don't. I'm the only director that didn't get fired. (Dirksen laughs.) I think if I had stayed longer, I think I would have been there, too.

Dirksen: No. No. You came up through the whole thing and you understood. So here you are Bob. I mean, I still can't get over what, you know, was going on with all of you, creating this magnificent agency. So now you've had basically two directors, because you had Dr. Kenney and Dr. Devine.

Coomer: Uh huh.

Dirksen: So how was the agency at this point? Were you starting to really function, and, also, reaching out to other components, like we said Main Street? What else was coming on then?

Coomer: Well, the staffing levels at that point were good, but in order to move the programs to the level that they became, we could have never done it just with staff alone.

Dirksen: Right.

Coomer: So at a number of our sites, we were out working and recruiting and building two components that, again, I give the sites a lot of credit for. We developed volunteer support, and we developed support organizations that literally helped generate funds and resources in order to carry out programs.

Dirksen: You mean like foundations?

Coomer: Like foundations, exactly. New Salem Lincoln League. I mean, there were a number of our sites that had site support organizations and volunteers that allowed us to expand programs beyond what the state resources could provide. And again, a lot of that was the initiative and creativeness of those people who worked at those sites. We were supporting that. We were pushing for us to get the resources to do what we really want to do. But to do that we've got to look beyond the state to accomplish that.

Dirksen: Uh huh.

Coomer: And so we were working very hard with volunteers. There were a lot of state agencies, I think, that could have used volunteers. We were one of the smallest agencies and had far greater volunteer numbers and hours of service than any other agency in state government. There's a downside. There's a sense that if a volunteer doesn't want to come to work that day, what do you do? Well, most of them are there because they really want to be there and we learned that, again, through kind of taking the chance and involving these people, seeing what they could accomplish, and that overrode, by far, the few minor issues that you had to contend with, with volunteers. So we were really pushing those programs forward.

Dirksen: Now were you involved with that?

Coomer: Yeah. I was. And I was encouraging and supportive of, sites, to go out and do this. Otherwise, we were going to be limited to the number of staff that we had at those particular sites. And there just wasn't enough people to do everything that needed to be done.

Dirksen: Right.

Coomer: I mean, there's the upside and downside of smaller sites and big sites. I don't know that it was necessarily easier to run a small site as compared to a big site, because the big site had more resources. They had more staff and they had more money.

Dirksen: Right.

Coomer: When you were the site manager at a small site, sometimes you were it.

Dirksen: Right.

Coomer: That meant you did the interpretive program. You managed the physical program. You cleaned the restrooms. You dealt with everything that came about. And that's a pretty hard job.

Dirksen: Yes.

Coomer: So that was the position that we were in. We were encouraging all of the sites, small, large, middle of the range, etc., to expand their resources by support organizations and volunteers in order to grow the program. We were also very fortunate, again, with the help of our guardian angels, the trustees, and the legislature to get a permanent improvement line established for the division.

Dirksen: That was what I was going to ask you. So what was it that you were doing, then, to make yourself, really a historic preservation agency, which is what you're talking about now?

Coomer: Yeah. We were trying to deliver the program. We were trying to involve local communities to support that particular site. It got exposure in a lot of ways and, therefore, the local legislators became supporters of the agency when it came down to getting things like the permanent improvement line. The permanent improvement line gave us a resource to go out and make minor improvements at sites, doing restoration work.

Dirksen: Now say that again, now what?

Coomer: We could do small projects, improvement projects, capitol-type projects, at our sites that prevented big capitol projects down the road. You take care of the hole in the roof as it happens as opposed to letting it go; the next thing you know you're dealing with all kinds of problems at that site. And you could use those permanent improvement funds to fix that hole or to do the painting or do whatever's necessary on a small scale. You extend the long-term life of that resource, of that building, of whatever it might be.

We got the support, politically, that we got an appropriation in the permanent improvement line that allowed us to bring up the level of the physical condition of these sites, whether it's the log cabin at New Salem or the wall at Fort de Chartres, or the Shawneetown bank building, to make the improvements that improve the appearance, and preserve the resource, that brought more local support, that allowed a bigger attraction, a more interesting experience that you could convey to the public, and those were the kinds of things that we were trying to build upon. By getting that line, as an example, we really had reached the point where rather than doing reactive maintenance, we were doing preventive maintenance, and that extended the life of these buildings and allowed them to be in pretty nice pristine type condition, as opposed to, you know, something that what's less than desirable to experience.

We've gone the opposite way, because now, with the capitol fund being where it is, I mean, it's so hard to see the improvements that were made at some of the sites, that now they're virtually in a position--the Mt. Pulaski Court House is in horrible condition. That wasn't the case back when the agency was in its hey-day, so to speak.

Dirksen: When would you think would be its hey-day?

Coomer: Jim Thompson was the guy. Yeah. The end of the Thompson administration was when we were getting probably more support, more resources than what we ever experienced. That was probably the hey-day and I think things have continued to decline to the point where some of these sites that had a staff that you could keep up with the needs, now they've got to pick what fires to put out. There's not enough resource there to take care of the things that need to be done. And what I, again, thank to Ray Norbut. You now don't get too excited about it because it's going to change. And what is bad, at some point in time, it will improve and get better. And that's the only thing that sometimes keeps you going. While it's really good, unfortunately, it's not going to necessarily stay good. You're going to go through a decline period. We've obviously gone through a decline period through the last two administrations, the last three administrations, probably. And, you know, the golden time was with Jim Thompson.

Dirksen: Uh huh.

Coomer: He had the interest in the Dana[-Thomas] House[1]. The Dana[-Thomas] House would have never happened without Governor Thompson's support.

Dirksen: Never happened.

Coomer: It would have been destroyed. It would have been sold off piece by piece were it not for Governor Thompson, and he chose to make the expenditure and to provide the resources to make it what it is today. But another governor likely wouldn't have made that decision. So, yeah, from a history, from the preservation standpoint, Governor Thompson probably had more interest in what we were trying to accomplish. And, obviously, he then had more resources to make it happen, as well.

When you're not getting the appropriation that you really feel like you need, you've got to look at the big picture and when we're sitting there competing with the state's needs, whether it's the Department of Corrections in the prisons that need guards, Children and Family Services and all the needs that they might have, our education and you look at we're competing with that, you've got to be real. You know, sometimes, we're not the priority. It doesn't mean you give up, but you get through it to the best you can and wait for that better times. It'll come back around. It/s just going to take a while getting there, unfortunately.

[1] A 1904 house in Springfield designed by Frank Lloyd Wright for Susan Lawrence Dana. It was Wright's first carte blanche assignment and is replete with entertainment wing, furniture of his design, and probably the most art glass of his residential designs. After her death, the home was purchased by Thomas Publishing Co. which preserved the home and contents. Eventually it was sold to the State of Illinois. The -Thomas name recognizes their stewardship.

But the downside of that, we're kind of digressing here, is we had really gotten from a capital standpoint, from the appearance of the buildings and the condition of the buildings, the restoration of the buildings and doing major restoration. Putting the Dana House back to what it was in 1908. Putting the Davis Mansion back to what it was in 1872. It was more than taking care of the roof; it was restoring that back to the original condition. We had the resources, we had the support, we had the legislative backing to get some of those projects done at that point in time that I think have shown what can be done with Illinois history and the benefits of it. Not just from saving something old, but preserving the resource.

Dirksen: Preserving it, which is what the whole point of the agency was.

Coomer: Absolutely. And what we had to do, Julie, is kind of change philosophy. While those were the things we were trying to accomplish, save those historic resources and interpret those historic resources, we then, I saw the need that we had to do more than that. We had to talk about the economic engine, and we had to convince the people who were making the appropriations that there was an economic viability to these resources, in addition to that it's just good to save history and it's good to talk about old history, that there was an economic impact for these small communities that was brought in by tourists.

Dirksen: I was going to ask you that. So, then, when did that all come about? Now was Devine still director then?

Coomer: I'll give that credit, probably, to Director Mogerman.

Dirksen: Okay. So she's the next one. Right.

Coomer: She followed Devine.

Dirksen: Because to have the impact and working relationship with tourism, that didn't used to happen.

Coomer: No. No. Didn't want to go there. You know, history was something totally different, and we shouldn't be concerned about what tourism was doing. That was the wrong approach. I don't know that it was wrong. There's was nothing to be gained by that, let me put it that way. We really needed to show that there was economic viability in addition to the good of saving history and interpreting history and we started talking about that in a big way with tourism.

Dirksen: Exactly.

Coomer: And the fact that, you know, Bryant Cottage over in Bement, Illinois. Bement's a little tiny burg, but Bryant Cottage brings some people that want to see it and they spend time and money in Bement and it's the scale of things. I won't say it's as important as what the Lincoln Museum is to Springfield,

but in its own way, it's a benefit to Bement in that same manner. It's bringing people into Bement that wouldn't be there otherwise and while they're there, they're buying gas, they're having a meal, they're going to a five and dime store or whatever they have in Bement and there's some money being spent in that community that wouldn't be happening were it not for Bryant Cottage.

Dirksen: Right.

Coomer: So we had to broaden our perspective and talk about this. I think the true historians, the scholars, I don't know that they necessarily bought into that idea.

Dirksen: No. We'll let them in, we'll open the door.

Coomer: I think to some degree some people reluctantly said, "Well, if that's what we've got to do, that's what we've got to do." (Dirksen laughs) But we really had to start talking about that and emphasizing that. We weren't a draw against the state appropriations, we were actually generating dollars in the communities that were generating tax dollars back into the coffers.

Dirksen: Right.

Coomer: I don't think, you know, some people didn't necessarily buy into that, but it could be substantiated. I didn't do bureau of tourism's job to generate those numbers. They crunched those numbers. Whether they're valid, I don't know. I mean, I wasn't involved with tourism, but they certainly promoted that.

Dirksen: Right.

Coomer: And, you know, I think there was validity to it.

Dirksen: Well, Susan Mogerman, when she became director, it seems that she would have brought a whole different perspective. Number one, she's not a historian.

Coomer: She's not a historian.

Dirksen: And she, of course, came from Governor Thompson's era, and looked at things in a whole different way. How was that accepted, and I know you've said such nice things about Susan and working with her.

Coomer: I liked [her]. I think Susan and I had some common ground. You know, Susan wasn't a historian. I wasn't a historian. I think Susan got it. I think she saw the big picture.

Diksen: Uh huh.

Coomer: What I liked about Susan most –and I think Susan was the best director that we had. What I liked about Susan, she didn't meddle. She didn't interfere where it wasn't necessary. She provided direction when it was needed. She provided support where it was needed. She made a conscious effort to get you what you needed in order to be able to do your job. But for the most part, she let you do your job. I respected that a lot in Susan. And while she wasn't a historian, I think she got it. She understood the point that I was just talking about from the tourism perspective. I don't think she sacrificed history in any manner.

Dirksen: No.

Coomer: I think she provided all the various divisions in the agency the support that they needed much like she did to the Division of Historic Sites. I won't say that I cared about the agency from a big picture perspective, I cared about the library, I cared about preservation services, but my focus was historic sites. I mean, those people were dependent upon me to carry their message forward and that's where I focused and I didn't get involved so much in the other areas because I felt like I had my responsibilities to the people and to the programs of the Historic Sites Division. But I think Susan provided all the divisions that kind of support.

Dirksen: I believe she was director almost fifteen years.

Coomer: She was the longest running director, yes. I mean, at one point, she was the longest director in state government, not just the agency. I think she had more tenure as a director than Transportation, Natural Resources, all the other agencies, which speaks well of Susan. She was able to find common ground and I think she shared a passion. It was more than just a job for Susan, and it showed. I think people gained a respect for her from that standpoint.

Dirksen: Alright, Bob. So now you and Susan are in place and Susan, which was very wise, has brought in the tourism because, don't you feel that the whole relationship with historic sites is tantamount to good working relationship with tourism and bringing the people in now means that educating them, but brings in the money and community support, etc.?

Coomer: Very much so. They're all hand-in-hand.

Dirksen: Right.

Coomer: You just figure out how to play the particular interest. And like I said, its good to save history, its good to educate through history, but it's also in this case good to show that history's having an economic impact.

Dirksen: Exactly.

Coomer: And Susan believed in that and I think, as opposed to being more challenged with times that hard decisions on fiscal matters had to be made and appropriations were reduced, there was a case that this agency is a financial engine as opposed to just something that….

Dirksen: A drag?

Coomer: was pulling away all the resource. I think, that helped us through some hard times. We experienced reductions; we don't have a capital build-up program that we once had.

Dirksen: You mean now.

Coomer: Yeah, now. I mean, its progressed through time with reductions in annual appropriations to the point where staff has been lost and programs have been lost and reduced etc., but I think it could have been a lot more at a quicker pace than the way that it played out if we weren't emphasizing the fact that there's another side to what we're doing as opposed to preservation and interpretation.

Dirksen: So, now you're moving on ahead and we're doing all theses things and then there's discussion about the Presidential Library and Museum.

Coomer: Yes.

Dirksen: Where were you when that all started and how was that being played? I know the trustees, of course, brought that to you. Julie and Sally and Frank Mason were instrumental in doing all this, but they may have the wonderful ideas. But what was the reaction to all this?

Coomer: I think the original idea of the Lincoln Presidential Library and Museum, I think that's something if it weren't for Julie Cellini, I don't think that would have ever happened.

Dirksen: Yes.

Coomer: She worked tirelessly to promote that concept and idea. I've heard her use the term twenty years.

Dirksen: Uh huh.

Coomer: You know, but she got turned down. She heard no for twenty years before she finally heard a yes.

Dirksen: Yes.

Coomer: And I think a lot of people would have been discouraged by that and would have given up. She never did.

Dirksen: This is about 1990 when that really started forming.

Coomer: Yeah, I think so. And, I mean, it may be something totally different, but my perspective on the way that it happened, we were fortunate enough to get an appropriation that was promoted by Judy Topinka. I don't know if she was a senator at the time, I think she was, but she might have been a rep at that point. There needed to be a better showing of the Gettysburg Address at the Old State Capitol.

Dirksen: Because at that time, tell the people where it was.

Coomer: Well, it was underneath a stairwell that led to the second floor at the Old State Capitol in virtually a vault that was covered up by a wooden facade.

Dirksen: Right.

Coomer: You had to stand up and look down.

Dirksen: It was like a display case.

Coomer: It was like a display case and it was secure, but it wasn't very inviting, let's put it that way. And so Judy Barr Topinka saw this and she said there's got to be a better way this is being displayed. She was able to get in one of our annual appropriations – I believe the amount was seventy-five thousand dollars - todo something about the Gettysburg Address display. I remember Julie had worked closely and had an interest in what we were doing at Cahokia Mounds. We had a firm by the name of Gerry Helferty Associates; they had done the design work and developed the concept for the museum at Cahokia Mounds. So we talked about if we could somehow or another put down visually a conceptual idea for promoting not just the Gettysburg Address, but the Lincoln story, if we could get something that we could put down on paper that we could take out and present to interests, whether it's legislative interests or community interests or corporate interests, whoever that might be, something that we could begin to develop the idea that all of this Lincoln material that's being held by the agency in a vault at the Old State Capitol, locked away, that nobody can experience, and bring that out, so that people can experience it; what a wonderful thing that would be. And that was Julie, I think, made the contacts with Representative Topinka about would she support this idea and she said she would. We hired Helferty Associates, basically a contract to come in and develop a conceptual plan for what ultimately became a presidential museum for Lincoln.

Dirksen: Now who was he?

Coomer: Gerry Helferty was the owner and the designer, the exhibit creator, the Bob Rogers on a much smaller scale.

Dirksen: Okay.

Coomer: We were real happy with what he did at Cahokia Mounds.

Dirksen: At Cahokia Mounds, okay.

Coomer: At Cahokia Mounds. Donna Shaw, who did the theater program down at Cahokia Mounds and at New Salem, was subbed by Gerry and it allowed us to tell the story at Cahokia Mounds that we couldn't tell before the visitor center. So it was taking that conceptual idea for a Lincoln center that we could begin to build a support for and we – I say we collectively – but it was Julie Cellini carrying that torch.

Dirksen: Uh huh.

Coomer: Susan worked very closely with her. I worked at whatever ends that I could offer assistance, and we hired Gerry Helferty, brought him in, sat down and said, This is what we're trying to do, what can you do for us? Well, he put together some boards and showed what could take place. Well, Julie carried these things around with her and began to build support for the concept.

Dirksen: A following.

Coomer: A following. And I can't imagine, you would have to talk to Julie, because only she could tell you, because she was out doing this.

Dirksen: Right.

Coomer: She was knocking on doors and beating down resistance and carrying this idea forward, and she was gaining some support. Rather than hearing no, we can't do this, she was beginning to hear a couple of yeses and a growing interest and started to build that idea.

Dirksen: Now did you go with Susan and Julie and Niki Stratton? I know, she was the Executive Director of Springfield Convention and Tourism, and they all went out to Washington, D. C. and made presentations out there to, at that time, it would have been Representative Richard Durbin.

Coomer: That's right.

Dirksen: And were you involved with that part of it, too?

Coomer: I didn't. I didn't make that trip. I went with Susan and Julie, Mayor Hasara.

Dirksen: That's right.

Coomer: Allen Grosboll, who was in Governor Edgar's administration as a Deputy Governor; that's probably not the right term, but he served as a Deputy Governor.

Dirksen: Uh huh.

Coomer: We made visits to other presidential museums to gain ideas about what they had done, how they had gone about doing it, their successes, their failures, etc., and was able to make those visits on a number of those occasions with Director Mogerman and with Chairperson Cellini to gain, to begin to build that information. The next step, I think she was making the case with Governor Edgar at that point.

Dirksen: Because he had come in at that time.

Coomer: He was the governor at that point. He had faced the challenges for seven years of trying to hold the budget and trying to get Illinois back in good fiscal standing and it was really like the last year of his second term, that he had, I think, the financial latitude to begin to do some things. I think at that point, he encouraged Julie to the point of, Let's carry this idea forward. And there was an appropriation that allowed us then to go out and seek the beginning of the museum. We talked about, with the experience at Cahokia Mounds, the way to go about doing this was to build the program, to get the idea for the content of what a museum should have, and then at that point in time, hire an architect. That was the way that we did it. We went through a selection committee that was put together.

Dirksen: Now who was put together on that?

Coomer: There was a Representative, I think Allen Grosboll served on it, I'm representing the governor's office. There was various representation.

Dirksen: Right.

Coomer: Julie, and actually, I think Bill Cellini, both served on the selection committee. Director Mogerman was on the committee. I was on the committee. Karen Hasara.

Dirksen: As mayor.

Coomer: As mayor. And there were a couple of other representatives, I think, from the state. There was a committee.

Dirksen: Well the mayor…..

Coomer: Pam Daniels, who was an IHPA trustee at that point, served on that selection committee. But, anyway, we did a RFP to have an exhibit designer come in and tell us what they could do and why they should be selected. We narrowed it down to four; they were invited in to make presentations and there were three that had done presidential museums at various locations, and then there was kind of a new idea of Bob Rogers.

Dirksen: That's for the exhibit design.

Coomer: That's for the exhibit design; that was first and foremost. We wanted to figure out what the building was going to present before we designed the building. You know, rather than build the box and then make the contents fit the box, we wanted to do it the other way.

Dirksen: So you had to have historians involved with that.

Coomer: There were historians. And we went through the process of selection and we really, I think, by our experience in seeing other museums we wanted, the coin term became engaged.

Dirksen: Uh huh.

Coomer: We wanted to engage the public.

Dirksen: Uh huh.

Coomer: And we felt with the four finalists that were the exhibit designers, that Bob Rogers presented the best opportunity to, quote, engage the visitor.

Dirksen: Uh huh.

Coomer: Lay terms, Julie, he brought an entertainment value.

Dirksen: He did.

Coomer: There's criticism that we were "Disneying" history by some of the scholars, but that was a conscious decision on our part. And by our part, it was the committee's determination that we wanted to engage the visitor, whether that be a youngster or whether it be a senior citizen. How can we make this thing more than just glass display cases with artifacts hidden by glass.

Dirksen: Exactly.

Coomer: We felt Bob Rogers gave us that best opportunity. Bob Rogers came in and put together what we he called the charrette;[2] the charrette brought in all kinds of interests. The tourism people were there. The historians were there. The teachers were there. The city was represented. The governor's office was represented. The agency was represented. I don't know, twenty, twenty-five people sat around the table and everybody was expressing interests.

Dirksen: Brainstorming.

[2] A charrette is a form of focused community engagement with a series of workshops where designers and consultants work together to explore design options for a significant building project..

Coomer: Exactly, exactly what it was. This is what we feel that should be a part of that museum and everybody got the opportunity to express themselves. Bob Rogers' job was to take down that information and then he went so far as to actually put boards together showing, for example, how do I interpret slavery and he would very quickly say, okay this could be an exhibit this is a way that it could be presented, and through the charrette was then fine-tuned. There were like two or three different meetings of this group that would take his information then and we refined it to the point where we came down to, okay, these are the major components that need to be expressed in the presidential museum. The group formed a consensus that was determined by resource, by financial resource, etc.; there was never enough money to do everything that needed to be done. I remember that we had the whole concept put together of what the museum should be. There were three major theaters and, as you know, we ended up with two major theaters. The third was going to be like an Imax.

Dirksen: Oh!

Coomer: And I recall that the budget grew. I remember Governor Edgar said forty million dollars, no more than forty million dollars. As you well know, it far exceeded forty million dollars.

Dirksen: Yes.

Coomer: But we were sitting at the table and it was time to make a hard decision about what are we going to cut to bring this in within budget and it was decided that the Imax theater was; we would loved to have had it, but couldn't afford it.

Dirksen: Right.

Coomer: Everybody that was involved with it at that point had the vision, they had the drive, they saw the momentum for this thing coming to be and it was like something that none of us ever [dreamed] in our wildest imagination. People said to me, boy, that must have been the opportunity of a lifetime. I said, No, and, let's see, it's been what, a hundred and fifty, nearly two hundred years; it's once in four lifetimes. (Dirksen laughs) You know, its not one lifetime, four lifetimes, to see this thing actually come to being.

But I want to go back and emphasize again, while there was a lot of support from different people to make this thing happen, but if Julie Cellini would have given up any one of those first twenty years, it could never ever happened and God bless the lady.

Dirksen: She's the mother of the ALPLM.

Coomer: More than the mother, more than the mother. She's not only the mother, I mean, as I told you earlier, the agency; were it not for Julie, the agency would never have been created. We would still be the small fish in the big pond over

at Natural Resources, fighting to keep our heads – I guess in this case – below water had she not taken the initiative. The only motive she had was her interest and her love.

Dirksen: Yes.

Coomer: And it was pure and as a result, both of these things came to be.

Dirksen: Right.

Coomer: I can't express to you the respect that I have for her interest, for her desire. and for her tenacity to make these things happen.

Dirksen: Well, I think part of it, though, everything you're saying is exactly right, but also the fact that she was not a staff person.

Coomer: No, no. She had a different perspective.

Dirksen: Allowed her the flexibility to come and go and push and shove and that's what helped.

Coomer: She had the avenue available to her.

Dirksen: Yes.

Coomer: And she didn't balk. A lot of people would have gone, well, I'm not going to go knock on the governor's door again, I'm sure, and she didn't. She just heard no and backed away to the point where she could go make the presentation again, make the appeal again.

Dirksen: Yes.

Coomer: She heard No, but she didn't abide by No, and had she, it wouldn't have happened. Thank God it happened. And we were making the case for different perspectives, this belongs in Chicago, it belongs in Washington, it belongs in Gettysburg, it belongs somewhere other than Springfield, and she was steadfast. That if it weren't for Springfield, Springfield was that moment in history where the man crossed happened here in Springfield; were it not for Springfield, it likely would have never happened. This was this the place where it needed to be, and she held onto that, because from a popular standpoint, yeah, probably any one of those other places would have gotten a bigger number of attendance, you know, were it Chicago, or were it Washington. It needed to be here in Springfield. I mean, in my heart, that's the way I always felt as well. But she didn't give up. Virtually everybody on that selection committee came to consensus of agreement of what it was going to be.

Once that got done, and it wasn't easy –there were people with different views on what it should be and how it should be presented – but when we finally gained the consensus, at that point it was time to hire the architect to come in and design the building. The selection committee did that as well. We worked with Capital Development Board, went through the process, the RFP, listened to people coming in making the case for why they would be the best architectural firm and we emphasized to everyone that we're not building the grand building in and of itself, we're building a shell for what Bob Rogers is going to design. That's pretty hard for an architect to accept. They want to leave their fingerprint on it, as well, and we didn't back away from that.

So it was then working with the architect that was hired, which was HOK out of St. Louis to work with Bob Rogers and with the committee to move this thing forward. And that really became a process of Julie getting directly involved, I mean, virtually every meeting, as Susan was. Capital projects, typically, was done on a higher level. It was the Superintendent of Historic Sites, which was me at that time, the project manager, which was our capital projects manager, and the site manager. That's who put together capital programs and, you know, led them forward. In this case, Julie was a part of that process. Susan was a part of that process. I had the opportunity to be a part of it as well. Capital Development Board – the city was represented.

Dirksen: Because the city donated property.

Coomer: They did.

Dirksen: So they had to be there, too.

Coomer: The park was provided.

Dirksen: And then what about federal funds? Who represented the federal funds?

Coomer: I'm sitting here because I think Senator Durbin's office was represented at various times, as was the Illinois representative, and I'm sitting here fumbling because they weren't always there, but they were there on occasion.

Dirksen: Right.

Coomer: And there were a combination of monies then that were put together.

Dirksen: Right.

Coomer: There was a combination of state money, city money and federal money that ultimately led to that; we used TEA21 money, ICETEA money, transportation money…

Dirksen: Okay.

Coomer: …where we could make a link to transportation. Union Station, there was a lot of T21 money, transportation monies that were given to the State of Illinois for transportation-related projects. Well, being an old railroad station, there were a lot of transportation funds there that were put into Union Station. We were creative in finding resources that we could use to build this big concept, you know, the footprint of the library and museum. So, it was a matter of then moving forward, bringing it to be and there were a lot of hours spent through the process of planning and design of the museum and approvals before things started to happen.

Dirksen: Okay, so now.

Coomer: Tom Schwartz. Tom Schwartz was a part of all these meetings, as well, representing the scholars and historians and the facts. I can remember Bob Rogers coming in to get ideas. Tom worked very closely with Bob and his staff and virtually approved all the text.

Dirksen: Well Bob always gave Tom so much credit.

Coomer: Sure, and he deserved it.

Dirksen: Because he was the historian who kept focus, even though this was going to be a new and different type of interpretation of history, not interpretation, but a way you present history; it was Tom, and Bob always.

Coomer: Tom was the scholar. I mean, a lot of us had ideas and concepts. Tom was the verification.

Dirksen: Yes, well that's good.

Coomer: He was the proof. And, you know, rather than dealing with wives' tales or folklore or whatever it might be, Tom was able to provide the actual documentation to support the idea or support the theme or support the exhibit, the show, or whatever it might be. Tom was that resource. I'm sure Tom reached out to a lot of people, as well. I remember sitting in one of the meetings where we were talking about the issues of slavery. Slavery had to be presented in some manner. It couldn't be ignored, it had to be addressed and we wanted to deal with it forthright and be right about it. I remember one of the people sitting serving on the charrette was a professor from, I think, a small university or college down in Georgia, who was a black lady; she gave the idea of the photo that's in the exhibit of the man who's sitting there with the welts on his back.

Dirksen: Scars.

Coomer: And everybody was going, well, you know, maybe that's the way we present it, the focus of the slavery issue and it was interesting, because she sat there and listened to all the input and then she spoke and she spoke very eloquently

to the point of, you can do that and it certainly is a representation, but she said if you really want to show the horror or slavery, show the slave auction where the family literally is being torn apart and will never be a family again and she said that represents the horrors of the issue probably in this format better than anything else we could do. She was absolutely right.

Dirksen: That one scene is so, oh!

Coomer: I don't know if it's my favorite exhibit. I mean the content of it is horrid.

Dirksen: Yeah.

Coomer: But in a lot of respects, it is my favorite. It is the most touching. As you well know, I used to go to the museum frequently; I would sit and listen to people and watch people react or whatever it might be. I used to love to be in that area and watch the impact of it, and it was moving. I mean, it brought tears to people's eyes, it was so moving. It could have been done a lot of ways; I don't know how it could have been done better. It's by getting that kind of representation of people who were having the input. But again, Tom was the person who was bringing that element of the contribution. It was a great team. Everybody played a part. Everybody did their role, but it was the leadership and the focus and the idea, and, again, I go back to chairperson Cellini, that without her, it would have never happened.

We were telling various parts of the Lincoln story at different places. In New Salem, you could talk about his formative years. You could go to the home and talk about the social life of Lincoln. You could go to the law office and talk about his law experience. You could go the Old State Capitol and find out about his political life. You couldn't go one place and get it all. It's by far the best presidential library, museum. It is by far the best history museum, I think, that exists, and I think we've gotten a lot of recognition. But, boy, you know, there was a lot of work, but what an effort, what an end result.

Dirksen: It is. You're exactly right. It is just amazing.

Coomer: Yup.

Dirksen: Well, here we are. Now we're ready to get this place built. We're ready to do things. By now, it's the end of the Edgar era, and now we're into George Ryan. And Director Mogerman's gone. What happened then?

Coomer: Well, she was there at the beginning of the Ryan administration and we were very fortunate in that [Illinois] First Lady Lura Lynn Ryan became a part of the committee and a part of the process, because it was still in the planning process.

Dirksen: Oh no, you're exactly right.

Coomer: We were still going through those elements and she became an active player herself, and, obviously, had direct (laugh)…

Dirksen: Access.

Coomer: Direct influence, (Dirksen laughs) and became passionate about the project as well. What Governor Edgar had identified as a forty million dollar project grew in funding to what became---

Dirksen: A hundred and sixty-five million, wasn't it?

Coomer: More. I mean, it was significantly beyond that number and fortunately, it was through her interest and her conveying to Governor Ryan what was being done and getting his support. At the same time, Representative Daniels was taking a very active role of what was being done as well. We were getting political support on all avenues, from the governor's office as well as the legislators that said, "This is a wonderful process."

Dirksen: Yes.

Coomer: It didn't just happen. There were a lot of doors being knocked on and a lot of presentations being made and a lot of appeals being done and to get the support, but it finally, in fact happened. But Susan was a part of that initial process and somewhere in that term , she stepped down as director and then Maynard Crossland became Director.

Dirksen: There was a lot of controversy about that whole thing and here she had fifteen years in that position and there was a lot of controversy in the community, too, between where the impact was going to be. Was it going to be done? Was the Presidential Library and Museum a Foundation? The oversight, as far as who was going to be the director of the ALPLM? There was a lot of controversy. Was she caught up in some of that where she had to step down?

Coomer: Yes. And, again, I wasn't a part of that.

Dirksen: Right.

Coomer: I just watched the process unfold. I don't know why it was done or to what end who made what decision. It seemed odd.

Dirksen: Yes.

Coomer: That she would no longer serve at that capacity at that point in time. I don't know the details. I thought she got a raw deal.

Dirksen: Yes.

Coomer: And here I am talking blunt, I guess.

Dirksen: No. No.

Coomer: I thought she got a raw deal. Because I don't think she did anything that deserved her no longer being director.

Dirksen: Right.

Coomer: It just happened. And it happens. When I took this position, my sense was you serve at the will of the people above you, and if they don't like the color of your tie that particular day, that's all the reason they needed to ask you to step down, for whatever reason it was. For whatever reason, Susan was asked to step down and Maynard became director. There were a lot of feelings among staff about how it happened.

Dirksen: I was going to say, that was my next question.

Coomer: Why that happened? To what end it happened?

Dirksen: How did staff react to all that? Because one of the things that I have noticed about my brief time that I worked for IHPA, which was an outstanding opportunity and experience for me, but also doing this oral history, the caliber of staff, the people who work in that agency, really, they're wonderful. They're very committed to helping preserve and maintain.

Coomer: It's more than just a job that motivates most of them.

Dirksen: It's more than just a job, and that is what I wondered, because you had all been formulated, Susan had been there. I mean, now you have a new governor, you have the whole thing going on with everything. Of course, there were things in the paper; I mean, this is public knowledge about Governor Ryan's Chief of Staff Bob Newtson and what he was wanting.

Coomer: Uh huh.

Dirksen: And where he was wanting it. So, what did you as staff people do? Were you aware of all that?

Coomer: No.

Dirksen: Or just by reading in the paper?

Coomer: No, nobody sat down and said, "This is what we're doing and this is why we're doing it." I was never a part of any such meetings.

Dirksen: Right.

Coomer: You just read what you read. You had the insight of being involved with some of the meetings more so than some of the staff. But, for whatever

reason, it was decided that there needed to be a different director for the agency. I don't think the motivation at the governor's office was what matched the commitment or dedication of what the agency had. Let me put it that way.

Dirksen: No, that's a good way.

Coomer: I think they had ulterior motives. I think there was an interest, certainly, in accomplishing this, but I think there were ulterior motives about ending up in jobs, making things happen the way they wanted them to happen, employing people in positions that they wanted people employed in. And I think Susan was a victim of that, for what it's worth. I don't think their motivation was steered in the same manner as what the agency was trying to create. That's dancing around it.

Dirksen: Uh huh.

Coomer: But that's my take on it. I think they had ulterior motives that were contrary to what the agency was really hoping to accomplish. And I think it impacted things like fundraising. I think it impacted moral. I think it impacted all kinds of areas that were counter-productive and, unfortunately, at a time when we should be at our zenith, these underlying tones just detracted from that.

Dirksen: Uh huh.

Coomer: It was sort of like Mike Devine and the political process. You've got to learn what it is and try to make it work when you get cuts in staffing or reductions in appropriations. You don't like that, but what I always felt was my job was to take that information and try to make it work to the best of your ability, to put a spin on it that it will be the least counterproductive to the mission that you could possibly, influence you could have on it. You don't like it. You resent it. And to some degree, what was being done at the governor's level I found counterproductive. I resented some of it. But it was going to happen. It was going to happen whether I liked it or I didn't like it. It was going to happen. You've got to find a way to put a spin on it, then, to make it palatable, as good as you can.

Dirksen: Yes.

Coomer: And that's what was taking place. And, as I say, it was unfortunate because we should have been on our zenith, on the highest note we could possibly have been with what was being created and how it was being created and the merits of it all, and here we were, dealing with the side issues of what people were trying to do that were counterproductive, I think, to the primary mission. It was unfortunate. It was really unfortunate. But it happened.

Dirksen: But Maynard didn't last very long, though.

Coomer: Didn't last long.

Dirksen: No.

Coomer: Maynard was a part of the Historical Library when the agency was formed. He was there before the agency was created.

Dirksen: Really?

Coomer: Yeah. So he'd been around quite a long time, but at the Historical Library. Maynard's strength, to me, was always his sense of humor. Maynard could get by with things just with his humor.

Dirksen: Uh huh.

Coomer: When Maynard became director, he lost his sense of humor. That was the greatest asset the guy had going. And things became very, very closed. I mean, there were two or three people that knew what was going on. It was very secretive. I think nobody knew for sure what was going on or why it was going on or why. I never felt like I had the support, as an example, that I felt like I had with Susan Mogerman. I think she had the passion for it. I think she had the interest for it. I think she was respectful. I never got those feelings with Maynard. I felt like he was in the director's chair. He served as director. He was my director, my boss, all that was what it was, but I never felt like I had the agency mission and the support for that mission with Maynard the way that I had it with Susan, as an example. This sounds negative.

Dirksen: No. It sounds truthful. I don't think it's negative. And I think, too, that it shows all the timing and everything that was going on, because it there was a lot behind-the-scenes. And like you said, again, it's public knowledge, because all people had to do during that time was to read and to watch because the community was very anxious for this place to get opened. There was a lot of excitement and, yet, there was "What do you mean, what's going on out here?" Why is the Foundation thinking about going out to U of I? Why is the Foundation not going to be downtown? I mean, there was all this.

Coomer: Uh huh.

Dirksen: And so it was a lot of this.

Coomer: Yeah, yeah, and it took away.

Dirksen: It did, but the excitement and the joy still maintained. So, now we got the library dedicated. We didn't open it yet.

Coomer: There's an element that comes into play there, and you mention, who's going to be the director?

Dirksen: Yes.

Coomer: And there was, again, I think it was a search committee that was.

Dirksen: The director of the ALPLM.

Coomer: The ALPLM, exactly, not the agency.

Dirksen: Right.

Coomer: But, I think there was a cooperation effort at first between our trustees, Chairman Cellini…

Dirksen: Yes.

Coomer: …and the governor's office about trying to find the right person to get this thing opened and moving forward. And I don't know the process. I wasn't a part of that process at all, nor should I have been a part of that process.

Dirksen: Because you were Superintendent of Historic Sites.

Coomer: Superintendent of Historic Sites. But I think through the process they went out and recruited and hired Richard Norton Smith to be the first director of the museum and library.

Dirksen: Uh huh.

Coomer: Richard Norton Smith had a track record of running museums, presidential museums and been at a number of sites.

Dirksen: Uh huh.

Coomer: Four or five, I don't know the exact number. Richard is a genius, in my opinion, when it comes to presidential history, whether it's current or past or when they're reviewing the people running for president. Richard was on CNN, or public television, talking about the candidates. I think the guy is extremely, extremely bright and scholarly in that particular area. The other thing that Richard brought is, he's charismatic as a media guru. I think he was a genius. He brought not just national attention, he brought international attention. He brought worldwide attention that was due to being Richard Norton Smith to the museum, and that was fantastic. So that was in place and Richard was picking up the elements of preparing to open the museum, and first off, the library. While I say that about Richard, his strengths, I think his weaknesses were he needed a day-to-day manager to work with him, to oversee day-to-day operations and management of staff and the resources. He had that, but he had the wrong guy, in my opinion. The guy that he had doing that...

Dirksen: He brought with him?

Coomer: He brought with him. He alienated a lot of staff and it was unfortunate. His motives were much like what we were talking about a little bit earlier. I don't think his motives were driven like what the agency and what the intent was. That was counterproductive, as it turned out, and it created a lot of issues and a lot of problems. For whatever reason, Richard chose to move on. They had an opportunity and saw that, I'm sure, as an opportunity for the opening. I don't think there could have been a better choice for someone to come in and serve in that capacity to get the museum open. He brought the President of the United States to attend the museum. I don't know that somebody else would have accomplished that. Maybe they would have, but I'm not sure. Richard was able to have done that. But that was the strength of Richard Norton Smith. It was also the downside of Richard Norton Smith.

Dirksen: By that time when Richard came, because he came in December of 2004…..

Coomer: Maynard was still director then.

Dirksen: Maynard was still director.

Coomer: Yeah. They didn't get along at all.

Dirksen: Right.

Coomer: I mean, just candid, they didn't get along at all, for whatever reason. I wasn't a part of that process, either, but there just reached a point where, not only did they not get along, they did not communicate.

Dirksen: Correct.

Coomer: They were on opposite positions, and that was extremely counterproductive to, again, which should have been the zenith of what we were trying to accomplish.

Dirksen: Uh huh.

Coomer: I don't know the ins and the outs of the details, necessarily, but I just know that there was not a working relationship that everybody expected, or needed, or what should have been.

Dirksen: Uh huh. And so, then, here we are. We're getting ready to open the museum on April 19, 2005, and you had a knock at your door.

Coomer: Yes.

Dirksen: When did they knock on your door and say, "Hey, there."

Coomer: I was given that opportunity. I was shocked. It was not something I solicited. I had real reservations, as a matter of fact, about doing that. I didn't necessarily feel I was director material. I loved the job that I was doing. I would have been very content continuing in the job that I was doing, but in consideration of her and out of respect for her, for what she wanted for the agency, if she felt that I could serve in that capacity and move the agency forward, if she felt that could be done, then I trusted her, I guess, in doing that. Would I have hired me in that position? Probably not. I don't think I would have. I didn't aspire to be that, for what its worth.

Dirksen: But she was so wise, because you had that trust. You were coming, and at that time Bob, that was needed. The agency needed that and you had the ability to work with people.

Coomer: Yeah, my scholarly background is limited. I had a passion for what the agency was.

Dirksen: Yes.

Coomer: I believed in what it was. At one point in time in my life, I tried to sell insurance for a year. I was horrible at it (Dirksen laughs) because I didn't believe in it. They were trying to sell health insurance and life insurance as a way to invest your money. I didn't believe in it and I was horrible at trying to sell it because I didn't believe it. It was easy for me to try to sell Historic Sites, to try to sell the agency, and the reason that was, was I believed in it and it was a passion at that point. And so, again, I'd have probably looked for somebody outside the agency. The previous director was hired from within and maybe it was time for somebody outside to come in with a different perspective, but she chose me, and I'm grateful, and I am extremely, extremely grateful to her. She was giving me an opportunity and, as I say, she evidently had enough confidence in me that she felt that I could do it and because of that I chose to do it.

Dirksen: What was the date on that?

Coomer: Oh, boy.

Dirksen: It was before the...

Coomer: Was it September or August? Somewhere in the fall of the year. It was early in the new fiscal year.

Dirksen: So it was right after the dedication? No.

Coomer: I was director when the dedication took place in April.

Dirksen: Okay, so then that had to have been sometime in the late fall.

Coomer: Yeah, it was, I think early fall, maybe.

Dirksen: Of 2004.

Coomer: Yeah, when she knocked on the door. It was somewhere early in that fiscal year or right at the beginning of the fiscal year. It takes time for some things to happen, of course. It was a mixed feeling. As I said, I loved what I was doing and that was what was near and dear to my heart, but at the same time, it was certainly an opportunity for me.

Dirksen: Well, she made the right choice, Bob. She made the right choice.

Coomer: Well, you're nice, Julie.

Dirksen: Well, then Richard left and then we got Rick Beard.

Coomer: Yeah.

Dirksen: And you were dealing with Rick Beard before you retired, too. How did that go?

Coomer: I tried to do with the director what the Susan had done with me. I tried to allow them to do their job. I tried to give them the support to do their job. That's what I virtually tried to do to some, no that's what I tried to do with the short period of time I had with Richard, and that's what I tried to do with Rick, as well. I got involved as a director should get involved and beyond that, I tried to give him the support so that he could do the job that he was hired to do. That was, I guess, the way I approached that job, Julie. Now, I was down there on the floor a lot.

Dirksen: A lot.

Coomer: And being, it's just me, I'm a hands-on. I mean, well, if it came down to being up on the stage to deliver the speech or to pick up the chairs afterwards, I was the guy that was better off picking up the chairs. That was the way that I tried to do things, I tried to provide the support, but to do it, not taking away from somebody trying to do that job. That's probably not said well, but, what I'm basically saying is I'm a back man.

Dirksen: Well, you're the support.

Coomer: Yeah, I guess that's the support.

Dirksen: That's why people who work for you stay there. That's why people who, if they need to stay longer, they do. It's because they know that you were there to support them.

Coomer: There are times you need to be out front. I wasn't good at being out front. My weakness, if I had to assess myself, would be I wasn't that. I could go work the legislators. I could go sell our appropriation. I could go meet with OMB and fight for our budget. I wasn't shy about doing those kinds of things, but when it came for public display, I didn't represent the agency the way the agency should have been represented. I think the agency has a challenge to get more public support. I don't think I did well. I did well at individual sites, and I went out and worked that, but in the bigger scheme of things of being a director, I wasn't a real good front-face director, I don't believe. That's my take on the matter. I wasn't comfortable, necessarily in that position, and I didn't do it very well.

Dirksen: I'm sure that, in some regards, that's your personal feeling, but I understand what you're saying, too, but that's a strength, though, that you know your weakness. That's a strength. If you could twirl a magic wand over all this that we've done and done with ALPLM, what would you do?

Coomer: To me, we missed the chance for the golden goose. The foundation that was going to establish an endowment for the long-term viability of the museum was a wonderful concept. It has not reached the level of success that it needed to reach and to me, the real opportunity to have done that was when things were moving forward, not after the fact. We're now after the fact several years and they really haven't been able to get the resources, to get the funding, that was envisioned. I think if I could twirl the magic wand, baton, somehow or another, I would liked to have seen them got that hundred and fifty million dollar endowment or the goal they were trying to achieve. That would have given some stability to the long-term program for the museum. As it is now, they are now in a financial position that much like the sites, they're going to live year-to-year and they're not going to have that long-term knowing that the resources are going to be there to continue the programs. It didn't get done.

I don't know, I can't tell you why it didn't get done, but to me, and this certainly isn't my expertise, either, but fundraising, the fundraising opportunity was when the thing was being put together, and it didn't get done. And then part of it was when you were talking about was back to the Ryan administration when Newtson was involved in doing that, making that effort and making limitations about what people could do and how they could do it and to what end they could do it. That was an opportunity that came and went and will never be again. And I don't know that the foundation is ever going to achieve that. To me, if you can't sell Lincoln, what in the world can you sell. But it hasn't been done and I think that opportunity's come and gone, unfortunately. But if it could be undone, I'd say that would be something we should have worked harder at or found a way to accomplish. And I'm not judging anybody for why it didn't happen, but it didn't happen, and it's going to be a struggle. Buying the collection, which was a tremendous opportunity, just put them that much further behind the eight ball and I don't know that

they're ever going to have those resources to have that endowment that was envisioned. So, if you could, you'd do that. The other, there's now; I give another short-fall on my part [and] staff, there's a separateness between the museum and the rest of the agency.

Dirksen: Uh huh.

Coomer: There's jealousy.

Dirksen: Yes.

Coomer: That's said in lay terms, but there's no other way to explain it rather than jealousy. All of sudden, it was the fair-haired child. It was getting the resources, it was getting the staff, it was getting the attention and everybody else [was jealous.] An example: the site, it's a presidential library and those are "other historic sites." Boy, that sticks in the craw of a lot of site managers, and understandably. You know, what's important to them is that site and they're categorized as other historic sites. There's rift there that is an undercurrent; nobody talks about it openly, but its there. Somehow or another, that's got to be banned. In time, I think, we'll do it, but it's a jealousy factor that's there.

Dirksen: That's a real good point.

Coomer: That would be great that if everybody was pulling on the rope in the same direction at the same time as opposed to. It's not counterproductive, necessarily, but it's not what you would like for it to be.

Dirksen: Uh huh.

Coomer: Director's got to set that example. I wasn't able to pull it off. It's there. It was there. It continues to be there.

Dirksen: Uh huh.

Coomer: It's just going to be something that I think time will eventually [heal]. I think the fact that the museum and library is in the financial position close to that everybody else is now, is probably going to bring some of that humility that will again help bridge that feeling or that sense.

Dirksen: Yes.

Coomer: You know, once you're in the same boat together, then its easier to pick up the oar and pull together.

Dirksen: Right.

Coomer: But, that's the other thing that I think that I wish I could have waved the wand and created a different feeling about.

Dirksen: Yes. You're exactly right Bob, because, you know, part of it was the fact that it was the excitement of being this huge new place and some of the people involved with that kept thinking that they were the big gorilla.

Coomer: Uh huh.

Dirksen: Well, they may have been a big gorilla, but they needed the whole pack to work.

Coomer: Yeah.

Dirksen: Because, you know, the museum is about the whole story.

Coomer: I blame Richard's choice for the operations manager. I think that created a lot of that as well. There was an attitude there that, that was just abrasive.

Dirksen: Yes.

Coomer: And people saw that, they experienced that and then that created part of that feeling, again, at a time I refer to the zenith when we all should have been holding up the effort. It was hard to do that with that individual.

Dirksen: Right.

Coomer: He created feelings that just were (chuckle) flat wrong, just flat wrong and, you know, Richard's choice, and the buck stops with the guy, but that guy created a lot of ill will that was counterproductive to so many interests.

Dirksen: Yes.

Coomer: And that contributed to it. I'm certainly not blaming that for this jealousy that I'm talking about, but it certainly didn't do anything to bring anybody on-board, either.

Dirksen: Right.

Coomer: So, you know, that's my two cents on it, Julie. Okay.

Dirksen: Alright, so now, Bob, we've got the library open, we have the presidential museum open, but that's not the end of the project. The Union Station, which was just a fabulous place that was just a mess. How in the world did you get that all done?

Coomer: The way we got it done was making it part of the museum, the Lincoln Presidential Museum complex. Were it not for that, it would have never gotten done solely on its own. There were different ideas about what Union

Station's function would be as we were in the planning process about how it would be used.

Dirksen: Yes.

Coomer: I don't know that its ever been effectively used, you know, the way I think people envisioned that it would be, but just from the standpoint of an historic structure, what a fantastic landmark for Springfield and a landmark for our beacon for all intent and purposes for the museum and the library.

Dirksen: Uh huh.

Coomer: But to make it a part of the complex, I think, was a stroke of genius. In addition to that, the parking lot, of course.

Dirksen: Uh huh.

Coomer: You know, it became a complex rather than just two different buildings, one

housing the museum, one housing the library. The success of any capital project, or the lack of success for any capital project, is on the team that's put together. You've got different components and whether its a capital development program, you know, CDB, Capital Development Bureau and its project manager and what it does to administer the project, but the components for the success of a capital project are Capital Development Bureau with the project manager and they go through the process of selecting the architect to design the project, and awarding the contract for the construction of the project. So, the components are the using agency, which was IHPA in this case, the Capital Development Board, the architect and the contractor. The success in any project is based on those four components and how well they work together and how effective they are in working together.

In the case of Union Station, we had four great efforts on all four interests' parts. The lack of the planning part of it and the using agency and the Capital Development Board, had they done their part and ended up with a lousy contractor, it would have been a bad project. Or if we'd had a bad design, it would have been a bad project. Or if we'd been fighting the process as the using agency, bad project. Or, you know, etc. But in this case the four components came together, I think, designed an excellent project and we had a contractor that did it, working extremely well with all the elements involved and it turned out to be a fantastic project. In the case of the agency, the work of Sandy Stinger as the project manager, but we were able to siphon off Anthony Robono out of Preservation Services who is, an outstanding resource when it comes to restoration architecture, but the other component beyond that is he's reasonable. (Dirksen chuckles.) Anthony, you can reason with and come to agreement upon. We reached a point where, the reconstruction of the tower is an example of how authentic is that going to be in consideration of what's necessary for the foundation, its appearance, etc., etc. I don't think

Anthony sacrificed anything, but he was reasonable in his approach to the restoration of the project, of the building. So, from the standpoint of a project, getting the funding and the support for it, I think the real sell was making it a part of the complex, but the success that we've had with it, and I'm talking with, you know, the forgone conclusion that it was an extremely wonderful, successful project. It is. I think the restoration aspects and mostly the exterior and the interior are outstanding efforts.

The other component of Union Station is the park, and the park really did have the intent of a function and I think has been successful

Dirksen: Yes.

Coomer: In its use as a function and, again, you see that's something that was done within Historic Sites Division overseeing the capital project. I keep going back; this just shows how varied her interests were. Julie Cellini was very much involved with the design of the park and how it was going to fit and the symmetry of it and some of the aspects of it. The bench, for example, that's up near the Union Station, and the function of that bench was something she had seen somewhere in Europe and the success of it as she saw it when she was in that locale and how she envisioned how it would work here for the park. The symmetry of the park and the beauty of the park are fantastic, but the function of the park is to serve as a gathering place, and to me it's the front door of Springfield now.

Dirksen: Uh huh.

Coomer: I think the Capitol and what's being done on Capitol Avenue certainly is a step towards that, but I think, to me, a real front door for Springfield now is Union Park. It serves as a focal point for the museum and for the library, but also serves as a point where people can come together. We've had some outstanding events and that was a part of it to allow the program of the museum to be moved outdoors into the park and it has functioned in that capacity. It's a real [park[, and you go back to what it was before Springfield had made it a park and what it has done in the aesthetics of Springfield, that and Union Station have just made a beautiful focal point for Springfield that didn't exist prior to.

Dirksen: Right.

Coomer: So Union Station, I still think there's got to be a better use, maybe, or a more functional use, perhaps, than what we're getting. I don't know what it is necessarily, but it doesn't get the interior use that it deserves to get and I think there's ways of doing that and programs down the road, I'm sure, will find the ways to make that happen. But it has become a landmark for Springfield.

Dirksen: A landmark. Exactly.

Coomer: And that certainly wasn't there and to tie it in with the museum and the library was a stroke of genius.

Dirksen: Uh huh. It's beautiful.

Coomer: And it's really matured and just going by, it's like, "Wow, that's really beautiful."

Dirksen: Yes.

Coomer: And been a real successful project.

Dirkesn: It is. Wonderful.

Coomer: A good successful project.

Dirksen: Well, like you said, the whole area there has been pulled together and is more than just the library/museum. It's a whole complex and a way of pulling the whole story, really, because, of course, the Union Station and why it's important and everything else.

Coomer: If I could envision something for it?

Dirksen: Uh huh.

Coomer: You know, it was talked about, and I think money limitations and for other reasons, but if and when the bank building should ever reach a point where it's not needed.

Dirksen: Uh huh.

Coomer: Opening that area up and making that green space that would tie the Old State Capitol then into the complex. Now there's a barrier there and that's that building. If and when, somewhere down the road. What I always learned about projects is you've got to have your ducks in a row so that when the opportunity presents itself, you can move forward. Example, Cahokia Mounds. We used to have meetings with the Cahokia Advisory Board about if and when there were ever a visitors' center, where it would be located. Where would we locate the visitors' center? Of course we're dealing with archeology. And we reached the point where nobody could come to even any degree of consensus about where it might be located. I emphasized that we have a responsibility to make that decision and we've got to weigh all the options and the alternatives, taking into account the archeological impacts, etc., but the bottom line is, we need that so that when that opportunity presents itself that, here's the project, are you guys ready to go, we can say, "Yes. This is where we want it."

Dirksen: Uh huh.

Coomer: And we worked to achieve that and, unbeknownst to us, like three years later, let's see, I was talking eighty-two and it happened in probably eighty-four or eighty-five through the Park and Conservation Fund that I was talking about. There was funding to build a visitor's center and we were able to say, "This is where we want it." Virtually, there was a subdivision there. There were like seventy homes. There was a subdivision on the plaza, one of the central plazas associated with the historical features of Cahokia Mounds, that we bought the subdivision with the idea that the visitor's center would go at the end of that subdivision. And we were able to say, "Yeah, we're ready to go forward." And that's what we needed, in essence.

Dirksen: You had to buy all those houses?

Coomer: Yeah we did. (Dirksen gasps.) We did. We bought them out, and seventy might have been an exaggeration. There were at least fifty homes in that subdivision that we bought out.

Dirksen: That was a big project.

Coomer: It was a big budget item at that point in time and we were a part of Conservation and that was where the funding was coming from. We were able to achieve that and it turns out that now Monk's Mound in relationship to the visitor's center and in addition to several of the other mounds, it's all open green space now, that before you'd had to look through a subdivision. But you've got to be ready.

Dirksen: Uh huh.

Coomer: And I think that's any of these aspects, you've got to be ready. You've got to have the plan in place so you know how to move forward. So this leads back to, at some point in time (Dirksen laughs) that bank building can go.

Dirksen: You want that open space.

Coomer: There's needs to be a plan so that the Old State Capitol then becomes a part of the complex and there isn't that visual barrier, that intrusion that's preventing that from happening now.

Dirksen: Uh huh.

Coomer: I'm not promoting that we go out and buy the bank building right now, but at some point down the road, I think that would be a wonderful feature, and then you've got Union Station looking directly down at the Old State Capitol and its relationship to the library, to the museum and you broaden this green space and it becomes, like the Liberty Bell, that Independence Avenue or Mall in Philadelphia. I think Springfield could have that, as well, and I think it would be a wonderful tie that would bring all this another dimension to that complex. But that's just a pipe dream. Gotta have 'em.

Dirksen: Gotta have 'em, Bob. Just a couple of things about the bicentennial. What was your role in working on the bicentennial in 2009?

Coomer: I served on some of the commission's meetings as director of the agency and tried to provide the agency's support for the planning and for the commitment to make some of the events happen. I retired before the actual events took place, so I didn't get to experience that, but I was involved with some of the initial planning for the events and it was a coming together of a lot of different interests and representing the agency, the home, the city, etc., coming together. That in itself is a great thing. It doesn't always happen, either, but there's just a lot of good that comes from those kinds of planning. And from all indications, while I wasn't here and didn't experience it first-hand, I've heard a lot of good reports about what was going on with the bicentennial. Remember the issues for the new monument and dealing with the race riot factor?

Dirksen: Uh huh. 1908.

Coomer: We got more directly involved with that and trying to get the support and consensus about what it was and where it was going to be and working with the various interests on that and the artist on that; but I got involved with a few of those projects in a little more detail, perhaps than some of the events that were scheduled. But, again, it was the foundation and the museum staff and the city and the Lincoln Home folks and I think there was good leadership with Marilyn Kuchak putting the efforts together. It helped bring interest, but it certainly put Springfield on a national map that was really a good effort by a lot of people.

Dirksen: A lot of people, you're right, so right. So now we're ready to say to Bob, "Okay, you're retired Bob." When does this decision get made?

Coomer: Boy, this one's hard to say. (Pause.) I'll just say it, Julie, that's me, I guess. I tell people that I should send flowers to Governor Blagojevich (Dirksen laughs) routinely, because if it weren't for him, I'd still be working. I say that from the standpoint that the administration that we were getting direction from the Governor's office and the lack of support that we were getting, the lack of direction that we were getting, the lack of concern, the lack of the ability to provide input. The whole process had broken down to a point where, you know, I talked about taking a decision and trying to put a positive spin on it to make it work to the best of your ability, I'd reached the point where I didn't feel like I could put any more positive spins on it.

The administration was by far the worst administration that I ever worked with. I never felt like I was a quitter, but I felt like to some degree I was a quitter when I made that decision. But the biggest influence on me making that decision was the agency had reached the point where I just felt like I couldn't find a way to put more positive spins on things. It was nearly

impossible. We were losing staff. We were losing resources. We were getting influenced with decisions that were wrong. It was like there's, I can't put a positive spin on this, and maybe somebody else can find a way to do that. Maybe somebody with their support would be able to come in and get more things done and get more support than what I was capable of doing. That was the primary reason, I guess, that I chose to retire when I did. Had I not and had things stayed on like they had been maybe under previous administrations, until somebody wanted to fire me, I probably would still be working, to tell you the truth. And from that standpoint, I guess I quit. I mean, I felt like I let people down that had counted on me, but I just reached the point where maybe somebody coming in representing that administration's views or concerns can get more done than what I can get done, and that's when I was capable. That had a lot to do with my decision. I loved what I was doing. I loved, certainly, the people that I worked with. I loved the support that I got from our trustees. That had nothing to do with that decision other than it just seemed to be the time.

Dirksen: But you know what, though, Bob, you left with people having nothing but the highest regard for you. Sometimes people stay on and they don't leave soon enough.

Coomer: Yes.

Dirksen: You left at a time when people all have utmost respect and high regard for you, so, I give you a lot of credit for that.

Coomer: Well, you're very kind in saying that. Respect. I mean, of all the adjectives a person can hope to achieve is, to me, respect has always been at about at the top of the list. If you can gain somebody's respect, that means you must have some support somewhere. If you can accomplish one thing, respect is what I would choose, because so many other adjectives are tied to respect. I really loved what I was doing and it was a great job. I was really lucky, and as I say, I was lucky enough to be in the right place at the right time and I really enjoyed the opportunity. I left. I have not been back much. I saw people that left and they kept involved, and that was wrong. It created problems for a lot of people. People were getting mixed direction and that was something that I learned from one of my mentors; he did what he shouldn't have done.

I swore that I would never do that, and I've tried to live up to that. I've gone back when somebody's asked me for specific assistance or help, and there are times that I would like to have gotten involved to some end, but I don't think that's what you should do. I think the next administration deserves its opportunity, and that's what I've tried to do. To be able to come in and do what you've allowed me to do today, to be able to reflect back and give thought to how some of this stuff came to be, just makes you feel really good.

Dirksen: Yes.

Coomer: I feel really good. There are things that I could have done differently and probably should have done differently, but as a whole, it was just a wonderful opportunity for me. I don't know how I was lucky enough to be blessed to be able to do that, but I was. The one thing that I tried to accomplish, I guess, is to provide people some direction, but primarily support to help them get their job done. Talking about respect, I have total respect for those site people and the library people and the people at the museum that carry out the program day in and day out. That's where the success of it is. If it weren't for them, there's absolutely no need for the administrator, whether it's the director or the fiscal officer or the personnel director or whoever, there wouldn't be a job if it weren't for those people out there carrying out that program day in and day out and I think people lose perspective of that. I never, ever tried to let that get shaded. If it weren't for them, the rest of it doesn't matter.

Dirksen: Oh, Bob, you're wonderful. Thank you. Thank you for sharing all this. This has just been so amazing, because we've had an afternoon walking through history.

Coomer: Yeah. It's been great.

Dirksen: Thank you.

Coomer: It's been great.

Dirksen: Thank you. Thank you. Thank you.

Coomer: Thank you. I appreciate the opportunity.