Speaker 1: If an item doesn’t appear in our records...it does not exist.

Speaker 2: I've never seen so many books in all my life.

Speaker 3: Get back to the library.

Speaker 4: You're right, no human being would stack books like this.

Speaker 5: What do you want to take out?

Speaker 6: The librarian.

Speaker 5: Shhh. Quiet, please.

Joe Linstroth: Welcome to the new podcast from the University of Michigan Library. I'm Joe Linstroth. Over the next few minutes, we hope to give you just a little glimpse of what goes on behind the reference desks, and in the stacks, when you're not there looking at that book, photograph, or article.

Later in the podcast, we're gonna have a little fun going through some of the crazy, actual real-life questions and comments U of M Librarians have received over the years.

Like this one, “I heard your library is a suppository with tax forms.”

But first, often called the accidental president, Michigan's own Gerald Ford, is most often remembered for two things. The first of course, is his pardon of Richard Nixon.

Gerald Ford: Now, therefore, I Gerald R. Ford, President of the United States, pursuant to the pardon power conferred upon me by Article II, Section 2, of the Constitution, have granted, and by these presences do grant a full, free and absolute pardon unto Richard Nixon.

Joe Linstroth: The second thing he's most remembered for is his not-so-flattering nickname, the “Klutz-in-Chief.” Ford's mistakes were the subject of numerous parodies by Chevy Chase on the then-new hit late-night comedy show Saturday Night Live.

Chevy Chase: I do have two major announcements to make. Uh-oh. No problem, no problem, no problem. Okay.

Joe Linstroth: But one U of M student thought there was much more to the 38th President's legacy. Noah McCarthy's thesis, “Gerald Ford, Human Rights, and the American Presidency,” was honored with the 2018 Blue Award for multi-semester projects by the Undergraduate Library Research Award Committee.

Noah McCarthy joins me now. Welcome.
Noah McCarthy: Great to be here Joe.

Joe Linstroth: This is a big project. The final draft is more than a hundred and fifty pages. How did you get started? It took two years of your life. Where’d you start?

Noah McCarthy: I started in the Ford Library, but I wasn't thinking about Ford. I was reading a lot of Chomsky and John Pilger and these American commentators, political social commentators, trying to decode some secret of the Vietnam War, and The Ford Library was just the place that had all the documents from that time period, or at least enough of them to interest me.

Joe Linstroth: What role did librarians play in your work, getting this set up? I just have to quick note that the Gerald R. Ford Library and Museum is independent, it’s not affiliated with the University of Michigan. Yes, this is the University of Michigan Library Podcast, your award was from the University of Michigan Library, but most of your work was at the Ford Library here in Ann Arbor. So how did the librarians at the Ford Museum help get you going?

Noah McCarthy: From the very start, I was working with the archivists at the Ford Library from a History 202 course called Doing History, which wanted us to practice that kind of primary source research. Just from that initial project I got those contacts from within the Ford Library, and those guys just helped me work through my ideas at a very early stage. When I was talking about things I was interested in, they would have a search engine suggestion or a set of databases that they knew would be helpful for me, knew would be relevant. That was just really welcome.

Joe Linstroth: Your thesis is full of examples that we can’t get into detail here, unfortunately. But I think it would surprise people. Here’s a few I wanna list off. He started the first G7 summit, which are the annual meetings still held today between the leaders of the world’s most industrialized nations. He ended American support for the Apartheid Regime in South Africa. Those are significant, but I want to focus on another example. You write in your paper that, “Ford made his toughest stand for Human Rights over an issue that was deeply unpopular at the time, refugees from South Vietnam.”

Gerald Ford: The United States has had a long tradition of opening its doors to immigrants from all countries. We’re a country built by immigrants. We have serious economic problems, but out of the 120,000 refugees, who are either here or on their way, 60% of those are children. They ought to be given an opportunity.

Joe Linstroth: Talk a bit about Ford’s legacy when it comes to Vietnamese refugees.

Noah McCarthy: I think Ford’s legacy, when it comes to Vietnamese refugees, is only really known, besides the people who were directly involved with that process, by the actual Vietnamese refugees. This stage in American History, he’s not remembered for this, whatsoever. It never became part of his political platform in the 1976 Elections, but the more, and this is a rarity when you look through these primary sources of Cold
War Era documents, et cetera, et cetera, the more you look into that case, the more shocked you are that he didn't play it up more, that you don't see it more often because it's a really kind of singular case of individual morality taking over and really dictating behind-the-scenes policy.

There were kind of two stages to that. The first stage was just the preparation for evacuating refugees from Saigon.

Joe Linstroth: I mean, we have these images that I think a lot of people know of the last helicopter leaving the Embassy in Saigon and people hanging onto the helicopter and falling off. That's probably an image that, if people know anything about the South Vietnamese refugees of Vietnam, that's it.

Speaker 11: Helicopters were landing on the roof and inside the compound as we walked to the back of the Embassy. We had to push and shove our way through a crowd of several hundred Vietnamese trying to scale the walls, only to be knocked back by U.S. Marines.

Noah McCarthy: It's a funny story actually, that ladder, so famously in the image, hanging off that helicopter, just that last kind of hope for those refugees, was something that Ford wanted to include in his museum, in his archives, over the complaints of Kissinger, who, along with many other people, said it was an image of failure, an image of humiliation at the end of that very failed and humiliating war. But Ford vouched very strongly for it to be kept because he thought it strongly represented the potential, and even in that humiliating moment for America, for that kind of compassion, for that kind of effort to be made. If you look behind the scenes, he was the one almost solely responsible for that effort.

Joe Linstroth: What surprised you most in researching and writing this paper?

Noah McCarthy: I think just the consistency of Gerald Ford was truly shocking, but it could be explained. And the explanation was what I was interested in, is why this person, who was so stereotypically earnest and decent and simple, just kind of —

Joe Linstroth: Decent is a word many used to describe him.

Noah McCarthy: Even though that was kind of a minimizing label, I argue in my thesis, it holds up. He was decent, and I never found any wavering of the character that has so kinda been his stereotype, but I never really understood why, but I guess that's kinda my thesis, why the decent label never translated over into any sort of connection with the human rights of the time.

Joe Linstroth: What about libraries, librarians, archivists, did you learn through this project that you didn't know before?

Noah McCarthy: How much they love their work. How knowledgeable they are about their work. It was kind of, maybe I shouldn't say this, but funny for me just to originally get in the
Ford Library and it kinda felt like everyone was still in the 70s to a certain degree. People really ... once you get in there, you can see the glasses are kind of larger. The clothes are a little different. There's just a vibe in there that's not nostalgic, not like people who are just stuck in the past, who are just trying to lead towards, just perpetually be in like a Plymouth Plantation tour guide role. It was people who were so connected with the past that it was something that they were able and eager to make a profession out of.

The archivists really appreciated when I asked for, not just advice in the technical sense, but advice for brainstorming, advice for just working out my thoughts in the context of the period we were talking about. The level of passion, the level of assistance and support really did surprise me and inspired me.


Noah McCarthy: Thank you so much Joe. It's been great to be here.

Joe Linstroth: And now for a little taste of the librarian life. The prevailing wisdom out there is that libraries are, well, dull, boring, and by extension, so are the lives of librarians. Au contraire. Here to help dispel that notion is Scott Dennis. He's a Librarian for Philosophy, General Reference, and Core Electronic Resources at U of M Library. Welcome Scott.

Scott Dennis: Thank you.

Joe Linstroth: Now you brought with you, what looks like an old card catalog drawer, and taped to the front is an old headline, worn, a bit brown. What does it say?

Scott Dennis: Just say no to alien flatworms of death.

Joe Linstroth: What does that mean?

Scott Dennis: That's an old tabloid headline that we clipped from somewhere and pasted to the front of the drawer to make it clear that it was the just-for-fun drawer.

Joe Linstroth: What exactly was this used for?

Scott Dennis: Well, library staff, librarians and assistants who worked at the reference desk, when we heard amusing things, or interesting things, or bizarre questions from patrons, we would write them down and tuck them in the drawers so we could ... our colleagues could read them later.

Joe Linstroth: These were only for librarian's eyes?
Scott Dennis: That's right. This was staff only. This was behind the desk.

Joe Linstroth: This drawer, by your count, was filled with a total of a hundred and ten notes scribbled by hand by U of M Librarians, and the notes date from 1990 to 2004. Is that right?

Scott Dennis: Correct.

Joe Linstroth: Alright, so you've broken these into four categories. The first shows just the broad range of questions librarians get asked. Let's hear a few.

Scott Dennis: "What is a lentil?"

"Is gefilte fish something you do to a fish, or is it a kind of fish?"

Joe Linstroth: You never caught a gefilte fish?

Scott Dennis: Yeah. Yeah exactly.

This is one of my favorites. "How long would it take, in Cleopatra's time, to travel between Egypt and Rome in a ship loaded with roses in the spring?"

Joe Linstroth: Okay that is amazingly detailed and what's even more amazing is I see there is an actual answer there.

Scott Dennis: Yes. We did manage to come up with an answer. It appears the answer would be at least a month, possibly two or more, depending on the north westerly winds.

Joe Linstroth: Wow. They even took in the wind. Wow.

Scott Dennis: You got to.

Joe Linstroth: I'm mean I guess you do, course.

Okay what's the next category you have?

Scott Dennis: So these are cases where the patrons seemed a little clueless, and we never judge patrons, and we’re always helpful and happy to answer any question, but afterwards, we had to chuckle at some of these.

Joe Linstroth: People are people.

Scott Dennis: Yes, exactly.

Joe Linstroth: There gonna ask silly, and let's be honest, some stupid questions.

Scott Dennis: Yeah. So the patron asked, “Do you have a translation of Shakespeare?”
The librarian asked, “Into what language?”

The patron said, “English?”

Here's another of my favorites. "I heard your library is a suppository with tax forms."

Joe Linstroth: [laugh] That might be my favorite so far. You can't even make that up.

Scott Dennis: No. That was back when we had paper tax forms in the library.

This one got asked repeatedly. "Is this the Library of Congress?"

Joe Linstroth: In Ann Arbor, Michigan.

Scott Dennis: Right. Exactly.

We didn't know if it was wishful thinking or I don't know what made people think that.

Joe Linstroth: I mean it is an imposing building, I guess.

Scott Dennis: It is, yeah, but one of the few libraries bigger than ours is the Library of Congress.

Joe Linstroth: How do you keep from face-palming right there in front of the guest? You have to just kind of step aside, go into a back room for a moment?

Scott Dennis: You can do that later usually. Yeah, you just want to be polite and friendly at all times, yeah.

Joe Linstroth: The next category is what?

Scott Dennis: These are cases where we would get asked for things. Things like pens, and staplers, paperclips, but sometimes people would ask for really bizarre items.

Joe Linstroth: So things that you and I or most folks wouldn't consider a library would have.

Scott Dennis: I wouldn't think so.

"You wouldn't have a lighter I could borrow would you?"

Joe Linstroth: You mean, in a giant building full of paper and old delicate paper?

Scott Dennis: Exactly. There's nothing were more concerned about than fire suppression, the last thing we would do is hand a lighter to a patron, even if we had one, which we didn't.

"Do you have a small Phillips-head screwdriver, not too big, just a little one?" That's one that got asked to me. I was the one who recorded that.
Joe Linstroth: In your back pocket did you have one?

Scott Dennis: No, we didn't have it, and what on earth it was needed for, I can only imagine.

"Do you have any umbrellas?" That actually was commonly asked anytime it was raining. I guess they were hoping we loaned those out too.

Joe Linstroth: Well it could be a money maker. We have an umbrella store right over there.

Scott Dennis: Actually, we sold library branded umbrellas for a while.

Joe Linstroth: There ya go.

Scott Dennis: Maybe that's when that came from.

Joe Linstroth: There's one last category. What is it?

Scott Dennis: These are the ones where it's kind of incredible that they're asking. You can't really figure out why given the circumstances, but we never judge. That's what I would say.

For example, “Excuse me, I'm looking for a book. Where would I find one?” Probably you'd say, “Well, you're in the right place.”

This one is a pet peeve of librarians. This one is actually asked occasionally. “Excuse me, is there any particular order associated with the placement of the books in the stacks?”

Joe Linstroth: I mean, you have to be tempted to just say, “Nope. They're in there somewhere.”

Scott Dennis: Right. Librarians spend a great deal of time figuring out where to place the books by call numbers.

“How do I get to the Graduate Library?” Of course, the person asking is on the second floor of the Graduate Library, having walked in the entrance and up the stairs.

Joe Linstroth: They're in. The actual. Library.

All right, so a couple things here. One, I just have to point out, it requires a tremendous amount of patience to be a world-class librarian.

Scott Dennis: Well, I won't argue with that.

Joe Linstroth: But I think something deeper here, and these are hilarious, these are funny, these are out there, but ultimately, it shows that librarians are really here to help people, no matter what the question is.
Scott Dennis: Yes, indeed. We always say there're no inappropriate questions. We're happy to have people ask any question they wanna ask and we're always happy to answer it. We may laugh a little bit later, depending on the question, but we're always happy to get the questions and to help people anyway we can. We realize some of what leads to some of the more clueless questions is just being awed by the library or being confused. I think all of us started there. I mean, many of us who became librarians, we started by being little kids entering a library and being completely awed and fascinated and amazed and curious. That's kind of why we ended up being librarians.

Joe Linstroth: It can also be stressful, intimidating.

Scott Dennis: Absolutely. Oh yes, an especially our stacks. We have ... the stacks of the Hatcher Graduate Library were built, part of them, in the nineteenth century. They're crowded, their absolutely packed with three million books.

Joe Linstroth: You have to follow the lines just to get out.

Scott Dennis: Exactly.

Joe Linstroth: Find the elevator.

Scott Dennis: We paint lines on the floor just so people can find their way out. Every once in a while we get calls at the reference desk from people on cell phones asking how to get out. We always start by asking what call numbers they see next to them and that lets us know where they are.

Joe Linstroth: Organization.

Scott Dennis: Yes, exactly.

Joe Linstroth: This also, what we just read here, this drawer, seems like a bit of cultural history of the Hatcher Graduate Library, if you will. Why is it important?

Scott Dennis: Well, I think, you're asking a librarian who believes in libraries and archives, and of course, I think it's important to record these things. We learn from those things in retrospect. I think it's just interesting to see how things change and how things remain the same, plus it's just fun, and that's part of the fun of keeping these things as well. I think it helps us understand where we've been and what has changed, what hasn't, and helps you understand what's important longer term.

Joe Linstroth: Scott Dennis, Librarian for Philosophy, General Reference and Core Electronic Resources for U of M Library. Scott, this is a lot of fun. Thanks for bringing this in.

Scott Dennis: Thank you. This was fun for me, too.
Joe Linstroth: That’s a wrap for our first edition of the University of Michigan Library Podcast. A special thanks to NBC and CBS news for the archival footage. For more stories about what's happening at the library, check out the latest edition of the digital magazine, which is out now, at magazine.lib.umich.edu. I'm Joe Linstroth, until next time.