Courts-martial records as they came to the National Archives at left. They may not be in archival housing but they are otherwise fine. VA XC files at right.
In 2010 NARA and the VA officially agreed to a records schedule that made Deceased Veterans Claims, also known as XC Files, the property of the National Archives 60 years after their date of transfer. This first transfer was 12,864 cubic feet. Cartoon found at http://ponderingprinciples.com/tag/veterans/ dated 5/9/14
We can use these records reconstruct the service of a veteran whose record had been destroyed in the devastating 1973 National Personnel Records Center fire. They are also very cool! Clockwise from left, letter from John Philip Sousa’s record, photo sent in by a veteran (the bartender) who was looking for work, excerpt from a finding of insanity where the veteran was said to have delusions of grandeur and thought he was a close friend of President Harding.
Records examined at/shipped from Lenexa; database entry and survey at Valmeyer; database QC and survey at Spanish Lake (St. Louis suburb). Staff at the NPRC’s Valmeyer annex charged with surveying and creating database.
QC’g the spreadsheet against the boxes of records revealed many discrepancies. This was due in part to inaccuracies inherent in the records. Also, these weren’t records the staff at Valmeyer were familiar with.
Not being able to see the claim number range makes searching extra difficult. And sometimes the labels stick so well that they tear off the numbers.
Preservation staff surveyed more than 100 boxes that had been flagged and bagged for mold. *None* of them were moldy. I later surveyed another 100 boxes and found five of them had mold; these were bagged and sent to Preservation for cleaning.
Oh,
Happy Day!
We found
a finding
aid!

The Lenexa staff discovered 117 boxes filled with these index cards—the index to our transfer. We later learned we had microfilmed index cards for VA records in our building.
Box 8374 has cases 820118-820180. Box 8376 has cases 169759-169790.

But that didn’t make this go away.
About 100 boxes had been damaged by water and soot, so they all had to be surveyed. Fortunately, they weren’t moldy.
‘Simplicity is a key to avoiding complication.’

— Joyce Meyer

Let’s just finish what we started, but with only the most basic information we need to search.
Sometimes, a box is more tape than cardboard.

I wish I could say this was an outlier.
We found many boxes that were really far from where they should be. When you’re dealing with thousands of boxes, it’s hard to just rearrange them. The database, as my supervisor said, showed that the problem was “like a monster that just keeps growing.”
Diane Doerner, one of our archives technicians, checks her box list against what she’s finding in the box as she rehouses. (“Ten Duel Commandments” from Hamilton.)
What we learned:
  • Know what you have
  • Communicate with staff

Do a thorough survey before starting on a processing project. We thought we had done that but as with the mold issues/non-issues, it could have been better. Had we let people know what we were doing, we’d have known about the XC microfilm earlier and would have saved ourselves some time.
We were asking the Valmeyer workers to get too much information--greater chance for error. If we had QC’d the database as soon as it was being created, we would have realized the problems much sooner.
All collections processing is different, which is why a processing guideline-per-box metric is frequently unhelpful. But here are some good guidelines: http://libraries.universityofcalifornia.edu/groups/files/hosc/docs/_Efficient_Archival_Processing_Guidelines_v3-1.pdf
Sometimes the hardest way is the best way.