



Women Need Not Apply:
The Story of Nancy McRae

By SA Christina Riebandt, Chicago Division

A rejection letter written by J. Edgar Hoover to a young woman interested in applying for the FBI special agent position has been passed down from generation to generation of female FBI agents. Many women in the Bureau, myself included, have this letter pinned up or framed at our desks as a reminder that we once were unable to hold the position we have now.

2021 marks the 50th anniversary of this infamous rejection letter. Reading it once again, I wanted to know who Nancy McRae was and where her life ultimately took her after this rejection. After a little online digging, I found Nancy. This is her story.

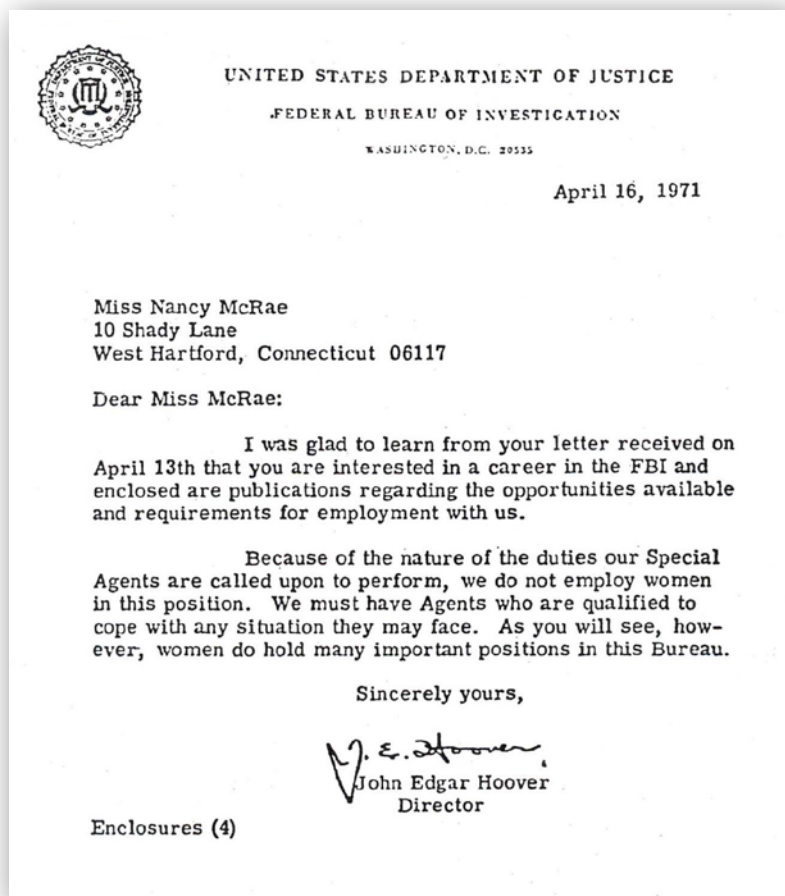
In April 1971, 16-year-old Nancy wrote a letter to Director J. Edgar Hoover expressing her interest in becoming an FBI special agent. Seeing as how she wrote to the FBI Director, Nancy did not expect a reply. However, a few days later while being picked up from school, her mom excitedly told her, "He wrote you back!" Ecstatic, Nancy thought that this would be the first step to achieving her dream job, an FBI special agent. However, the response Nancy received from Director Hoover is one that many current and former female FBI agents have shared amongst each other:

Dear Miss McRae:

I was glad to learn from your letter received on April 13th that you are interested in a career in the FBI and enclosed are publications regarding the opportunities available and requirements for employment with us.

Because of the nature of the duties our Special Agents are called upon to perform, we do not employ women in this position. We must have Agents who are qualified to cope with any situation they may face. As you will see, however, women do hold many important positions in this Bureau.

Sincerely yours,
John Edgar Hoover
Director



Nancy was devastated. She thought, how could he judge me if he's never met me? When she got home that day, she threw the letter on her bed and decided she wasn't going to give up on her law enforcement dream.

Born in Chicago, Nancy was adopted by Grady and Jean McRae from West Hartford, Connecticut. Her dad wanted her to become an airline attendant so he could travel around the world for free on a buddy pass.

Nancy had other plans, and at 15, she joined the West Hartford Police Department Police Explorer program. She enjoyed learning all about law enforcement and going on ride-alongs with the officers. When her mentors at the police department heard about Hoover's letter, they said that other federal agencies had female agents, but she would first need a four-year college degree.

Nancy graduated from Eastern Kentucky University in 1977 with an associate's degree in criminalistics and a bachelor's degree in law enforcement with a minor in fire science. While in college, Nancy played tennis and field hockey. Her first job out of college was with the Kentucky Attorney General's Office as a criminal investigator specializing in Medicaid fraud and arson cases.

During a two-week course on narcotics taught by the DEA, Nancy became interested in working federal drug cases. At the end of the course, she learned that the DEA was hiring special agents. Knowing law enforcement officers need to be in peak physical condition, Nancy began running and joined the YMCA. While at the gym, she



Nancy pursued her career goal of working in law enforcement and served in the DEA for eight years.

befriended firefighters who helped her get in shape. After a long application process, Nancy was accepted into the DEA.

At 25, Nancy attended the DEA Academy in Washington, D.C., from December 1979 to March 1980. She was assigned to the Los Angeles Field Office, her fifth choice on her preference list. Nancy became part of the Asia group, where she worked a variety of investigations, including "China white" heroin cases. Nancy also worked undercover numerous times.

While serving on a task force with FBI Special Agent Lee Rasmussen, Nancy recalled the letter she received from Hoover in 1971. Lee asked Nancy if she still had letter to see if it was an authentic Director Hoover signature. To Nancy's surprise, her mom had the original letter from all those years ago. Her mom mailed the letter, and Nancy showed it to Lee, who was surprised to see that it was an authentic signature.

Nancy's experience as a DEA special agent was not one she expected when she joined. While working a case with her group, she witnessed

her co-workers beat up an individual they had in custody. When questioned about it by an assistant U.S. attorney, Nancy thought about the story of Frank Serpico, a New York City police officer who had the courage to speak out about corruption within the department in hopes of making positive changes.

Nancy told the truth about the incident while her co-workers lied. From there on out, her co-workers did not want to work with her and made her life extremely difficult. In 1988, Nancy retired early from the DEA.

After she retired, Nancy and her husband moved to New Jersey where he was assigned to the DEA's New York Field Office. After a few years, they moved to Northern Virginia before finally settling in Florida. Nancy has two children, a son

and a daughter, and she loves swimming and working in her garden.

Fifty years later, Nancy still thinks about her dream of becoming an FBI agent. She has Director Hoover's letter to her framed at her house. She's not sure how the letter started circulating within the FBI, but suspects Lee made a copy of it. Regardless of its origin, the letter is a badge of honor to many female agents who keep a copy as a reminder that we once weren't allowed to have the career we now have.

A Note from Nancy

"I am honored to be writing all of you today. To think that a letter that made me so angry 50 years ago could bring such joy and happiness today is truly amazing," Nancy said.

"Each of us share a common bond — hard work, perseverance and determination in becoming U.S. Department of Justice female special agents, an accomplishment we should all be very proud of. I was fortunate that the majority of my career was fantastic, and I worked with honest and dedicated agents.

"They were the among the hardest workers I've ever met. Looking back, I am grateful to have had the strength I needed to maintain my morals and values and to stay honest and true to the oath we all took when we became agents (same oath, different laws). Times are a lot more difficult now than they were for me. Don't ever forget that you too have that inner strength when you need it!

"Enjoy your careers, you earned it! Most importantly, stay safe." ■

