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Oral History Interview with Katherine Brokaw,
Conducted over Skype,
Conducted by Meg Miner, Illinois Wesleyan Archivist

Meg Miner: Hello Katie!

Katherine Brokaw: Hi!

Miner: Hi Katie, it's Meg. How are you?

Brokaw: That's- I can't see you, but that's okay. I can hear you.

Miner: That's okay. I actually- I have- I said on- on my message I have...satellite so sometimes video really...gums up the work so I'm on a- I'm on a still shot here. Do you have the- the still shot of me with my old book? [laughs]

Brokaw: Gotcha.

Miner: Anyways, thank you so much.

Brokaw: I don't, but I believe it. I can imagine it.

Miner: Okay. [laughs]

Brokaw: Yeah, of course! No problem.

Miner: I usually start out with just a sort of a general kind of, you know, how are you affiliated with Wesleyan, how did you know Minor, and we can go into some of those questions but if you have other things specifically, you know, starting with some of your stories, it would be fantastic.

Brokaw: Yeah. Well, we go way back. [Miner laughs] So- so let me mention this first. I was fourth generation on both sides of my family to attend Illinois Wesleyan.

Miner: Oh my gosh! You didn't tell me it was four. I know your mom.

Brokaw: Do you know my mom?

Miner: I do know your mom. She's done great research in the archives.

Brokaw: Okay. You do know my mom because she's always in Ames. Yeah, she's always in Ames.

Miner: Yeah, she's a wonderful writer and I love- love her work.

Brokaw: Yeah, that's good. I'll tell her you said that. She- yeah. So- so my parents met at Wesleyan, you know, my- three of my four grandparents went there and then two great grandparents went there so- and I grew up in Bloomington-Normal so, you know, going to basketball games at Horton and all of it. So I met Minor as a fourth grader. [Miner laughs] Well, I may have met him even like as he was being inaugurated as- as president. But- but my first real memory of him which is on video and I have it. We converted it to DVD when he- when he was sick so we could send it to him and I have a copy too, but...I interviewed him as a fourth grader for like this school project and it's so dear because he's so completely sweet and cute with me.

Miner: Oh my gosh!

Brokaw: And kind of telling me, “(unsure, 2:20-2:21??)” But he was kind of telling me about like what I can do in college and, you know, really in that Minor way just taking me seriously as a person even though I was just this barely ten year old girl. And...yeah. And we were kind of good buds ever since. Like he sort of always looked out for me and my parents were so involved and I was always on campus a lot, you know, and so it was just like I'm an alumni kid. And- and then- it wasn't a forgone conclusion that I should go to Wesleyan and I think actually he told my mom I should go to Princeton...[laughs]...when I was in high school.

Miner: Oh my gosh! [laughs]

Brokaw: 'Cause, you know, he was a Princeton guy. But when I said that I wanted to pursue both theater and art, Wesleyan was looking like the best option because they were going to let me do that. So yeah. So from day one when I arrived on campus, I was already a good friend of- of Minor's. And...yeah. And he always looked out for me and I mean, it would mean so much to me and like I miss him every day. But at the end of my freshman year I decided that I wanted to triple major theatre, art, and English as well after taking Jim McGowan's poetry class.

Miner: Oh my!

Brokaw: And my advisor and the dean of general education and everyone told me I could not do that. [Miner laughs] And Minor exclusively said, “Oh, you should totally do that!” [Miner laughs] “Of course you can.” So, I mean, that's how he was, right? I mean, he just had complete faith in you and so he had such- I mean, you always wanted to live up to his view of you, right? Like he thought that you- he thought that I was interested in it before I did, and so I wanted to be

that for him in a way. And so...yeah. So I said I would it. I sort of ignored my advisors and I was going to do it and always- always knowing that the one person who had my back in that was Miner and that he- you know, he inspired me to do so much that I never would have thought myself capable of. I don't- I don't think I'd be an academic without him.

Miner: Wow.

Brokaw: And so...yeah. So- so that's just sort of...his kind of importance in my- in my life. But as for specifically the collection stuff, he would periodically just- I'm trying to remember exactly how he would do it. I think- but I think he would email me and cc me or something. [Miner laughs] Basically, saying "Hey, you should come over and bring some friends and look at the books." [both laugh] "Like how bout next week?" And you know, I was a really busy college kid but of course, I was like, "Okay!" So I- I would like ask a few of my friends who were into books, like, you know, fellow English majors like, "Do you want to go to the President's house with me next week and just like have dinner and look at- look at the books?" And that happened several times and we would get there and poor Mike Welsh would have to cater it and we would just be there in his living room and he would pull out, you know, the Dante and everything.

Miner: Oh my!

Brokaw: We would just look at them and he was just so excited to share that. And it's- it's funny because I- well, I mean, at that point when I was at Illinois Wesleyan like I was just sort of all Emily Dickinson all the time, and he actually did go out of his way to find me Dickinson things a few times. And when I was really interested in graphic design, he picked up a few graphic design books that he gave to me.

Miner: Hmm.

Brokaw: But I wasn't- I'm a medieval Renaissance scholar. Right?

Miner: Hmm.

Brokaw: So I think back at like some of his books and I would so geek out on them now, but to be honest I didn't as much at the time as I wish I had. But some of my friends really did. I mean, we were all, you know, enthusiastic. Yeah, it was great. And then he would- and I remember it was like very cute, like he would often sort of, "Let's all go around and say what our favorite book is!" Or-

Miner: Oh my gosh!

Brokaw: -whatever. He would have these-

Miner: Oh my gosh.

Brokaw: (unsure, 7:07??) Yeah. It was very, very sweet.

Miner: So was that in his- in his living room at his house?

Brokaw: Mm-hmm.

Miner: Okay.

Brokaw: Yeah. It was-

Miner: So I've heard-

Brokaw: -at his house. We would sit like- and eat in the dining room.

Miner: I've heard stories about the basement. I've heard stories about the basement. Did you go to the basement or did he have everything all-

Brokaw: That's where the trains were.

Miner: Oh!

Brokaw: That's where the trains were, right? And I don't think I ever saw the trains. Yeah, I'm pretty sure. He may have had them out already when we got there and so we saw- I guess we saw some musical instruments too. I never saw the trains and I don't- it's hard 'cause sometimes I'm like I've heard so much about them and I think I've seen them but I don't think I ever saw the trains. But I liked books because I was an English major.

Miner: Oh cool! Of course, yeah. Well, I'm told that-

Brokaw: (severe audio distortion, 8:00-8:02??)He would get me books too. When he would go to sales, he would bring back books and just like, "Come by my office." And he would give me books and then like my third copy of (unsure, 8:11-8:13??). [Miner laughs] Yeah.

Miner: That was a favorite of his. [laughs]

Brokaw: Which is fine.

Miner: Yeah.

Brokaw: I mean, I love (unsure, 8:19??)

Miner: Yeah.

Brokaw: Can't have enough. Yeah.

Miner: So he- he would go to like sales somewhere or buy- buy books in shops and then say, "Oh, this is something Katie might like," and- and just bring it back to you?

Brokaw: Hmm?

Miner: Did he invite you over for-

Brokaw: Yeah.

Miner: Go ahead.

Brokaw: Oh yeah, it was like he would copy- he would copy stuff or yeah, find stuff. I think he may have just said like, "Come buy the office. I found something for you." And then I'd come pick it up.

Miner: Hmm.

Brokaw: Well, I think his- his- he got this book about fonts, which is just like definitely not something that he was interested in but that he knew I was because I for while had an interest in graphic design and so he just saw them and grabbed them. Yeah, it was really, really thoughtful and amazing. Yeah.

Miner: That's- that's actually so fun for me to hear because there's this one teeny-tiny little book that's got a red cover and it's in French and it's in four different colors and it's a book about different colors in books. I mean, I don't read French, but anyways, it just-

Brokaw: Oh!

Miner: -it's- it's unique among the-

Brokaw: That sounds amazing.

Miner: -this sort of book- artsy kind of books, because he didn't have a lot of that stuff about typography and that sort of thing, so that's interesting. This- this is great for me because this is like clues, right? Clues about why he has stuff that aren't en masse maybe, right? So when you would go to his-

Brokaw: Hmm? Yeah.

Miner: -house, would it be like after he'd purchased something or found something, or was just spur of the moment, "Hey, you guys should come and look at some cool books?"

Brokaw: I would say that.

Miner: Yeah.

Brokaw: Yeah, like it was often the greatest hits that he had for a while that he would show us. I can remember it.

Miner: That's great.

Brokaw: Yeah. Yeah.

Miner: Well, I'm told that that basement had shelves that had three deeps books, books three deep on a shelf. I've- I'm hoping somebody will have taken a picture in all of these conversations, but so far nobody- nobody has said they did, so- are you a collector now?

Brokaw: (audio distorts, 10:36-10:39??) I mean, you know, I'm an academic, so I have a lot of books.

Miner: Right. Yeah.

Brokaw: I have some- I have some old books, like I have a few old editions of Shakespeare and stuff like that, but I wouldn't say that it's...a big thing with me. And I collect- I have theatre posters. And I do- it's vaguely on my mind, I don't want to over-exaggerate for the case of the story.

Miner: Sure, yeah.

Brokaw: But...you know, the idea that collections are fun and something that I find interesting. But my collecting has been limited to books and theater posters. Yeah.

Miner: Did he ever tell you about why he got involved in collecting?

Brokaw: No. I don't think so.

Miner: Did he- did you have a sense that he read the books that he had or- or was like really well organized or just in how he arranged them or anything like that?

Brokaw: Hmm. I don't know. I mean, definitely there were some that I don't think- they were more about the object and...than the content. I mean, certainly when we went over there like he clearly didn't have trouble like pulling things out that he thought would be of interest. I don't remember how long it took. It seems- well, I don't know. I would always seem like they would be organized but it also seem like they wouldn't be organized. [laughs]

Miner: Hmm.

Brokaw: It seems like it would be organized in a way that only he would understand.

Miner: See, that's what I'm guessing. Yeah.

Brokaw: I mean, 'cause he-

Miner: Yeah.

Brokaw: And I like to think of Minor as sort of cataloguing. I think about the way that he would write stuff down on scraps of paper.

Miner: Yeah.

Brokaw: Right? Like how could that have been an efficient system? We would tell him something and he would go, "Oh! Oh! Oh!" and he would write it down on some tiny piece of paper and put it in his coat pocket. And it was like, "Is there a room just full of like scraps of paper?"

Miner: Hmm.

Brokaw: How do these (unsure, 12:53??) I don't know. But he did seem to have a, you know, obviously an eccentric way of storing information, but could always remember things. So...yeah. I just have another favorite memory that has nothing to do with collecting. But I was often the speaker at like recruitment events for high school students.

Miner: Hmm.

Brokaw: And I did it so much that Minor would always joke, like, “Okay. Next time, I’m going to be Kate Brokaw and talk about being a triple major and you are going to be Minor Myers and talk about finding your passion.” [Miner laughs] And then we would like imitate each other and take each other’s place. It was great.

Miner: Oh, that’s fun! In front of prospective students?

Brokaw: No.

Miner: Oh, that’s so great.

Brokaw: No. He would say that like as we were getting ready to get on stage or whatever. Yeah. Okay.

Miner: That’s great! I didn’t know that. So you- you were involved in the recruitment efforts too then. That’s wonderful. Hmm.

Brokaw: Yeah.

Miner: What do you think a guy like- a guy. I think of him as a guy, you know? I don’t think of him as the president. But what do you think a personality like that had an effect on students? And I mean, obviously in your case you had this long-standing understanding of the kind of person he was. But what do you think it- what did you see in your peers?

Brokaw: Well, that’s a good question ‘cause I’m really the last class that with him all the way through. It’s impossible too. Yeah. I mean, he- certainly when I would tell my friends, “Do you want to come over to the president’s house?” They’d be so excited and it wasn’t because it was the president’s house. It was because it was him. But- and I think that- but I think that above and beyond that he was interesting and eccentric and brilliant and all of these things, I think his- I think his biggest gift and what impacted students the most is the way he would take interest in you and listen to you.

Miner: Hmm.

Brokaw: I remember a friend of mine saw him. It must have been just the year after we graduated because he got- he got sick in ‘03. She saw- she was working for DePott Paint and she saw him at some event and he was like talking to her what she was doing, which was like PR for

a paint company, and she was so like, “He talked to me like it was the most interesting he’d ever heard!” [Miner laughs] “And he just made me feel like- I wasn’t feeling really good about my job but he made me feel like it was really interesting.” And like that’s what he did with everyone, like he made you feel interesting. So even if you didn’t feel interesting, he was able- I think it was genuine. He was genuinely curious about the world and about other people and much more interested in what they had to say than talking.

Miner: Hmm.

Brokaw: Which is what all, you know, like, you know, number one sign of intelligence. And so-so yeah. He made students feel like they had something to say that was important and important enough for him to care about and listen to and not in a condescending way, in a genuinely interesting way. And I think that the impact of that was really huge.

Miner: That’s fantastic. And do- do you- you know, as a student, did you have a different perspective on the institution, right? But do you- do you think that you could maybe reflect a little bit on what kind of effect that would have had on the institution?

Brokaw: Hmm. I mean, like I kind of- like I know it’s complicated.

Miner: Yeah.

Brokaw: Because like I know that- yeah, because I know that his legacy is complicated in a lot of ways. But I also know that he- I mean, I also think about someone like (name, 17:12??) who I think like flourished under Minor ‘cause now that I’m a faculty member I can kind of in retrospect think about this. [Miner laughs] He was able to be so multifarious in pursuing his interests and I think it was kind of under that same idea of the- I mean, so I’m at a liberal arts university right now and he would just push so much to have a resource output that is narrow and it doesn’t- having multiple interests and passions is not necessarily rewarded....[Miner laughs]... in most parts of higher education. And I know that part of it is the difference between a research institution and a liberal arts college, but I think that especially at Illinois Wesleyan, I feel like- and I’m sure that not all faculty agreed with this or liked it, but for certain kinds of faculty and definitely a few that I knew or know, they felt like they could- they could do that thing they wanted students to do which was to be really experimental and- and broad in their research-research and teaching. Yeah. I’d say that was probably inspired by him. And I know that- I know that he is beloved by the community and alumni too-

Miner: Yeah. That’s a great-

Brokaw: -for the same reasons as faculty and students.

Miner: That's a great observation. I hadn't even thought about that, the effect on faculty, right? So thanks for making that bridge. [laughs] Wow.

Brokaw: Yeah. I think Dr. (name, 19:02??) is probably- have you talked to him?

Miner: I have not, but I certainly will.

Brokaw: Yeah. I think he's- I mean, he and I always say that we're like the two co-presidents of the Minor fan club, so...yeah.

Miner: Wow. I will send him a personal note. I sent a lot of sort of blast messages through a lot of different avenues because I really didn't know who I should talk to, so I appreciate the- that was one of my questions for you. Who should I talk about this to? So-

Brokaw: Mm-hmm.

Miner: What was your favorite book of his?

Brokaw: I think probably the Dante. But like I said, I- because I wasn't a medievalist yet, I didn't appreciate it as much as I should have. My mom made me this, but-

Miner: Oh, a tie!

Brokaw: Yeah, so- so Jim and Andy saved that for me.

Miner: Oh my!

Brokaw: This was one- 'cause he would write me notes all the time, right? So this is one of the notes that he sent me.

Miner: That's so sweet.

Brokaw: I'd like to ask a question I have. I have a big collection of Minor notes.

Miner: Minor notes, that's fantastic.

Brokaw: I love the one I have because it had crap spilled all over it. It's so him.

Miner: [laughs] I could see that. Well, he apparently saw a tie advertisement somewhere for- for one of the other schools he was involved at. I think it was Hobart-Williams Smith and he wrote

to the tie company and he said, "What can you do for Illinois Wesleyan?" And they sent him a bunch of stuff, so that's funny.

Brokaw: Oh wow! Yeah. So Hobart makes me think of another person you should talk to is- is Miles Buckinghamshire-

Miner: I don't know that name.

Brokaw: -whose email I can get you. The Earl of Buckinghamshire? I think he's still an honorary trustee. So he- he- so somehow like Hobart was founded by people in his family or something like that, so he and Minor knew each other from way, way back.

Miner: Hmm.

Brokaw: And then when Minor came to Wesleyan, he made the Earl and Countess of Buckinghamshire honorary trustees 'cause why not? [Miner laughs] And they were very good friends and he would visit them in England quite a lot. But I actually didn't meet them until Minor's funeral which was, yeah, July of '03, right before I went to Cambridge. And so we met, and they said, "Oh! You must come stay with us," and so we became friends, you know, after Minor's death and that's- that's our bond.

Miner: Oh wow!

Brokaw: But we would honestly have not have a lot in common otherwise. But- but still, it's the case that we exchange Christmas cards and emails once in a while and when I go to England, I often- I'll often see them and we always talk about- about Minor. So he would be an interesting person to reach out to 'cause he knows him from before Illinois Wesleyan, and I mean, I'm pretty sure just thinking about the fact the Minor would visit them in England, and where they live which is near the Cotswolds, I'm sure they went antiquing together. I would think.

Miner: Oh my gosh!

Brokaw: So yeah. I can- I can give you his email.

Miner: Well, that would be great if you could write a letter of introduction or something, that would be great. That's great.

Brokaw: Mm-hmm. Mm-hmm. Yeah, yeah, I'll send him a- I'll send him a note. I do think, you know, I have it because we've been emailing all summer.

Miner: Oh, good for you! [laughs] That's great. Well, did you ever- did you ever talk with him about libraries sort of as entities, like, you know, their value or their place, or- I mean, my- my focus on my writing part of this has to be pretty narrow and that's one of the things that I- I think is interesting about him is that he had a very specific view of what the Ames Library should be, what a university library should be, and one of the- the things I'm thinking is that he really thought of it as a collection of, you know, the kinds of collections that he had, rather than a kind of collection for an undergraduate institution, right? And- and the things that he's been interviewed about for libraries certainly speak to that. He- he...talked about not wanting any books removed from libraries, that- that was just a horrible thing to do, so I don't know he ever had like conversations that would, you know, what his visions for libraries were or if it was all about the cool things he had.

Brokaw: Yeah. I don't necessarily remember any, but I do certainly remember his passion for...for Ames.

Miner: Hmm.

Brokaw: -and his excitement for like that reading room-

Miner: Yeah.

Brokaw: -and things like that-

Miner: Yeah.

Brokaw: -and wanting them to be beautiful spaces that students wanted to spend time in. But I don't- I can't honestly say that I recall sort of philosophical conversations about what a library should be.

Miner: Yeah.

Brokaw: It makes me really miss Ames.

Miner: Aww.

Brokaw: (unsure, 24:28-24:29??) It's not what research libraries are, but what research libraries will be, which means no books, by the way.

Miner: Yeah.

Brokaw: There's no books in ours.

Miner: Oh! You're kidding me. Oh my gosh. That's-

Brokaw: Yeah. They didn't want to spend a lot of money. It's a lot of e-books, which is not the same.

Miner: Yeah.

Brokaw: Yeah.

Miner: I hear you. I hear you on that. Well, Ames is still beautiful and still have many books, but we don't have as many as when Minor was around. It's- it's- it's a different, you know-

Brokaw:

Miner: -it's a different world. It's not a different world, it's a different philosophy, so- and that's I think that's one of the things-

Brokaw: Yeah.

Miner: -one of the difficult things, or one of the difficult balancing things. I'm very privileged to work in special collections and so I get to make excuses for keeping books...[laughs]...that we don't get to keep elsewhere.

Brokaw: Yeah. Yeah.

Miner: So anyways, not to put you on the spot, just one of those things I'm asking people. So when you- you know, leading into the- the sort of end of his collection, right, do you know how all of that happened? What happened to his collection of books after he died?

Brokaw: I just know that Jim and Andrea from the antique store got a lot of stuff.

Miner: Okay.

Brokaw: But I don't think they got the books.

Miner: Yeah.

Brokaw: Maybe they got some.

Miner: Well, the thing that happened-

Brokaw: Yeah.

Miner: -and I was a part-time employee at the time, but the thing that happened was the university purchased his collection of books from the family. One of the things that I've been really curious about is my perception of Minor as a collector was that he did collect and he never got rid of things and some collectors love that sort of thrill of the chase, right? So they get stuff and then they, you know, get rid of it and they buy new stuff, or, you know, buy more stuff and they sort of have an enjoyment in acquiring, but I don't think that that was Minor. I think Minor was an acquirer and not a disperser. [laughs]

Brokaw: Yeah.

Miner: Although it sounds like he gave things away-

Brokaw: Yeah. Yeah.

Miner: -to people. So one of the things that I'm-

Brokaw: Yeah. I heard that.

Miner: -asking people who knew him is what you think he might have thought of what happened to his collection. So would he have been happy that his books went out into the world again or would he have thought that- that maybe, you know, they should have been kept at Illinois Wesleyan in Ames?

Brokaw: That's a good question. I mean, he certainly would have been aware of the fact- he knew that Ellen wouldn't be interested or the boys particularly. Yeah. I mean, I guess I'm not sure. I think he would have felt like it- I don't know. I don't know. And I mean, his will doesn't- sorry. I don't know. I'm- I'm not sure that I think he would have been particularly uptight about them remaining at Illinois Wesleyan or not. I think he would certainly like-

Miner: Hmm.

Brokaw: He loved that place and I think he would have liked the idea of some special things remaining there and being remembered there, but I don't- I don't- I don't imagine that he would have had a huge- I think if he had a huge desire for them to stay in certain hands, he would have specified.

Miner: Hmm. Interesting.

Brokaw: I would think.

Miner: It's okay. I know it's hard to answer because I don't know who knows him and how. I'm just kind of asking, so- well, we-

Brokaw: Yeah.

Miner: -did keep some of them, so next time you come back through this area, if you want to, you know, stop in, then we can reminisce over old books. [laughs]

Brokaw: I'd love that!

Miner: Is there anything else we should know about Minor? Anything else you want to- specifically comes to mind or-

Brokaw: Not at the moment, though if anything comes along I'll pass it along. Yeah. Yeah, he's the best.

Miner: Katie, I cannot thank you enough for doing this. I'm sure it's hard, but it's- it's really I think helpful to hear people and to hear the passion in people's voices. It's one of the reasons like oral history is- is you get the- you get that.

Brokaw: Thank you. Thank you. It was really fun to talk about him.