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## Keith Crotz

Keith Crotz

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Portrait of a Collector Interview with Keith Crotz

Transcribed by Kate Browne

BEGIN TRANSCRIPT

**Meg Miner:** Good afternoon. This is Meg Miner. I'm the archivist at Illinois Wesleyan University. Uh, today is April 21<sup>st</sup>, 2016, and this is my sabbatical project looking into our former president Minor Myers, Jr., his life as a book collector, um, and a collector, apparently, of many other things. Um, and how all that came about and the ways that it might have influenced the people that he knew and the institutions that he served. So, with me today, uh, via Skype and cell phone is, um, Keith. Keith, please introduce yourself and, uh, tell me how you knew Minor.

**Keith Crotz:** Hi, this is Keith Crotz. Uh, I met Minor on several phone conversations and then he came to my book shop, American Botanist Booksellers in Chillicothe, Illinois.

**Miner:** So, you were—he knew you were a seller and he would call and make inquiries, then, about what you had?

**Crotz:** Yes, indeed he would. And he would occasionally buy from our catalog that we issued four or five times a year.

**Miner:** And what—

**Crotz:** Our catalogs would contain used, used and rare books on gardening, farming, and, uh, ornamental horticulture.

**Miner:** And about what time period was this?

**Crotz:** This would have been, um, 1990 through say '91, '92, maybe.

**Miner:** And then he would call and you would either ship it or he would come and pick it up, or—

**Crotz:** I would generally ship things to him. He did visit the shop one time and bought a goodly number of items.

**Miner:** *(laughs)* And these were things he knew going there or he just saw—he came for something specific and then found other things?

**Crotz:** Exactly. He came for something he wanted to look at. He liked ornamental horticulture from the 1870s, uh, both British and American. Formal gardens, landscape architecture, uh, monographs on specific plants that were popular at that time period. The latter quarter of the, uh, 19<sup>th</sup> century.

**Miner:** Do you recall any conversations about why he developed this interest? Or what specifically he was collecting for? Was it for, like, design or to understand the plants, or...?

**Crotz:** His interest—his historical interest is what I, you know, gleaned from him. And he was interested particularly in the Phoenix Nursery Company. In Bloomington, Illinois.

**Miner:** Oh, so local history. So—

**Crotz:** Local history, yes.

**Miner:** Yeah. So, did he come alone on these visits?

**Crotz:** Yes, he did.

**Miner:** I had heard from somebody else that they—that he had some—occasional people that he went shopping with. So I wasn't sure if this was a group visit or not.

**Crotz:** Nope, he was the only one I met.

**Miner:** So, how interesting. Did you get a sense that he was doing this kind of, uh, work or you thought it was just more of an interest in the period and the place then?

**Crotz:** Yes, I think period and place would make more sense to me. I never was able to get from him exactly what he was gonna do with all these books he was accumulating. And it was interesting, then, in the long term to attend the auction of his library, and see just what it was that he had put together.

**Miner:** What did you think of that?

**Crotz:** Um, from a professional standpoint, he had pursued volumes of titles without real respect for the investment value of, you know, latter 19<sup>th</sup> century horticultural books. He wasn't concerned if a plate was missing or if the binding was cracked or worn. He wanted the information inside the book.

**Miner:** Do you think that's unusual from what you've seen of other kinds of collectors?

**Crotz:** Um, in garden books, not so much, because they're not collecting them for monetary gain. They're for the information. But, um, in his case, it was volumes.

**Miner:** Did you see any familiar ones that you'd—that he purchased from you?

**Crotz:** Oh, yes! Yes, I bought a number of boxes and brought them back.

**Miner:** Brought them back. What do you think a collector would make of that sort of end of his collection?

**Crotz:** Um, disappointed, I think. So many years of putting it all together and then just a general shotgun dispersal of it.

**Miner:** Okay. Did you ever get the sense from him that he ever sold any parts of his collections? Or was that just not part of your conversations?

**Crotz:** That wouldn't—never came up.

**Miner:** Okay. I—

**Crotz:** I always tried to maintain a certain—(*speaking to someone else*) several different colors. Yeah, she got a one-three and a one-five. Yeah. (*return to interview*) All right, sorry. So, where was I?

**Miner:** You were saying—

**Crotz:** Yeah, no, he didn't talk about what he sold. I never queried, you know, what he did with the books, what his intention was. You know, once he got them.

**Miner:** One thing that's puzzling to people who I've talked to who are book collectors themselves is that, you know, obviously your comment about condition, um, but also that, um, he didn't, uh, collect, it seems like, for monetary—you know, like, to make an investment for, you know, his legacy or, um, or really to even redistribute his collection. But he also wasn't a member of any of the sort of book collecting societies as far as I can tell. I haven't found anybody yet that knows—

**Crotz:** No.

**Miner:** Yeah.

**Crotz:** No, and he didn't—yeah, he didn't belong to the Council on Botanical and Horticultural Libraries. Um, he didn't go to say, the Morton Arboretum that I know of in Lisle, Illinois. I asked, you know, a number of questions like that at one time and, no, he did it because he liked it. So I left it at that. But that's interesting that we all collectively have a similar viewpoint.

**Miner:** Right.

**Crotz:** That makes me kind of smile.

**Miner:** Yeah, me too. And, you know, it's funny thing that people who have puzzled over it or thought, well, he really couldn't have been serious about collecting, but—um, and I do think that by talking to people such as yourself that I'm starting to get a better idea of, uh, his purposes in these things so your comment about it being location-specific and local history-specific is very interesting and telling to me as well but, yeah, it's pretty clear that he wasn't—

**Crotz:** Right.

**Miner:** —the kind of guy who was gonna be a joiner into anybody's club. Or be very critical about any how many gathers there were or doing any, you know, sort of—what they taught me in library school about books. You know, that sort of analysis. So.

**Crotz:** Yeah, he didn't care about the signatures, the color plates, the bibliography per se was secondary to his interests.

**Miner:** But he didn't say to you that he was sort of writing about this particular topic or anything.

**Crotz:** No. I, I would—if I were to venture a guess toward that, he was very interested in the gentleman, and later the son, and people who bought the Phoenix Nursery after it went bankrupt.

**Miner:** Okay.

**Crotz:** He had a certain love for that one Bloomington, Illinois nursery.

**Miner:** Well, and there is a connection to that nursery in Illinois Wesleyan so that might have been part of it.

**Crotz:** Ah, there you go.

**Miner:** Yeah.

**Crotz:** I did not know that.

**Miner:** Yeah. Well, that's wonderful. So, he was a catalog purchaser, you said, and sometimes on the phone. Did he ever ask you to look out for specific titles or types of things like this particular nursery?

**Crotz:** No. No, other than just Phoenix. I went through some notes on my computer database that I had to go to a different computer to bring up even it's so old.

**Miner:** *(laughs)*

**Crotz:** That was his interest was that nursery.

**Miner:** Yeah, that's great. Um, did he ever talk to you about books in libraries or, or any sort of, you know, sort of underpinning philosophy of his collecting interest?

**Crotz:** Uh, not that I recall...

**Miner:** Sure. Okay. So, um, are there other things you think we should know about your encounters with him or the kinds of things that he was after?

**Crotz:** Um, no. No, it—if—it was—if the subject and the title caught his attention, that was important to him. I don't think he came in armed with a list of any particular authors and titles. He just wanted to look and see what was available on the shelves.

**Miner:** Okay.

**Crotz:** And that was pretty evident, at his, you know, the sale of boxes.

**Miner:** What was evident? That...

**Crotz:** That—evident that there was not a great deal of discipline—

**Miner:** Yeah.

**Crotz:** —in his interest or his buying.

**Miner:** Have you countered—encountered other people like that in your experience?

**Crotz:** Oh, yes. Yes. Individuals that, um, buy because they want to read on a particular subject. And I say, you know, this is a \$60 book. You can get it at the library. No, I don't know when I can get to it but I want to have it.

**Miner:** So is there a common characteristic that you see among these people? Just their interest in those topics?

**Crotz:** You—I don't think that you can paint them with that broad a brush.

**Miner:** Okay.

**Crotz:** Each collector is very individually different. Um. I don't want to use packrat as a word, but you have the impecunious collector who is very careful and—I think that's the right word.

**Miner:** I love that word. I've not heard it before.

**Crotz:** You have those that—there's a book collecting title with that name on it, I think. And there are books about book collecting, you know, *Round and About the Book-Stalls*. There are quite a few books in the 1930s and '40s that deal with the subject of book collecting as a discipline.

**Miner:** Hm. Yeah, and some of those were in his collection too. We kept some of those. We kept about ten percent of what he had.

**Crotz:** Ah ha.

**Miner:** I don't recall this particular title.

**Crotz:** That's interesting.

**Miner:** Yeah, impecunious. That's an interesting word. I'll have to look into that some more. Um.

**Crotz:** Yes.

**Miner:** But we kept part of the collection that we were collecting in in our special collections. So, um. But most of it just really wasn't suitable for an undergraduate college.

**Crotz:** No, no.

**Miner:** Um, so—

**Crotz:** I mean, *The Italian Gardens of the Renaissance*, even for a graduate would have been too much.

**Miner:** (*laughs*) So the type of collector—I don't know—any—I lost my thought. You were talking about different types of collectors.

**Crotz:** Yeah, some were, um, you know, like, Dr. Myers was with volume. Others were very surgical in their specific interests. Um. Others would, like, you know, two or three books, or some would say to me, I want the best book about this particular garden topic. And, you know, having read bibliographies. Having read, um, Wave Hill and some of the Washington, D.C. botanical libraries, you know, they've got their idea about what's important—so you try to put that together for a person.

**Miner:** Huh. Are you a collector yourself?

**Crotz:** I collect books by an author named Rick Bass, and esteemed the fictionist Hunter S. Thompson.

**Miner:** Hm. So not gardens.

**Crotz:** That's about it.

**Miner:** Okay.

**Crotz:** No. No, I sell garden books. I do not collect garden books (*laughs*).

**Miner:** That's interesting. That is so interesting. How did you get into collecting?

**Crotz:** Well, it—um, I started out collecting books on—my mom was an English teacher so I was always reading. And so, I started with some early fiction authors and put together a collection of some of those. And, of course, in the late '70s, early '80s, put together collections of, uh, some guy named Stephen King. And was laid off from a job and started—I was in Philadelphia at the time and I started working part-time for a bookseller and after a while they said, you know, why are you interested in fiction? You've got these botany degrees, you've got this experience with plants. There's only two other plant-associated booksellers in the United States. You need to go over and do that.

**Miner:** Oh wow.

**Crotz:** It turns out my undergraduate degree in the history of science helped considerably.

**Miner:** Hm.

**Crotz:** So, you know, thirty some odd years alter, here we are talking.

**Miner:** Where did you, uh, take your degrees?

**Crotz:** University of Illinois and Southern Illinois University. With a year at the Field Museum just to connect everything together.

**Miner:** Wow. That does wrap it up. *(laughs)* Did Minor ever talk to you about how he got interested in this kind of collecting?

**Crotz:** If he did, I do not recall.

**Miner:** Sure. Well, is there anything else we should know about him or does that cover the range?

**Crotz:** No, I can't think of anything. I wracked my brain trying to dredge up, you know, any obnoxious trivia that comes to mind regarding him. He was just fun. He was pleasant. He was jovial. He wasn't, you know, a particularly serious individual when it came to the books he was lookin' at.

**Miner:** Huh. Well, who can ask for more than that?

**Crotz:** Yeah, and it was fun. And, you know, Minor Myers, you know, I'm interested in this, this, and this. I'm associated with Illinois Wesleyan, etc. And he was the by-God president of the place, and it was just like talking to another guy.

**Miner:** *(laughs)* so pretty down to earth.

**Crotz:** That's what I found fascinating. Yes, yes.

**Miner:** Well, that's really good um. Well, I really appreciate—

**Crotz:** I hope this is added some substance.

**Miner:** It has, yeah. I love to talk to people who are—you have a particular knowledge of an area that no one else I've spoken to does. So the bit about gardening is really interesting.

**Crotz:** Ah.

**Miner:** And unique. So thank you so much for that contribution. And thank you for coming to the auction. I hope you helped them find other homes.

**Crotz:** Well, thank you.

**Miner:** I hope they found other homes. And, uh—

**Crotz:** Most of them—I still have a few of them, but not many.

**Miner:** All right.

**Crotz:** And some I might be keeping just because I like 'em.



**Miner:** What's so bad about that?

**Crotz:** All right. Nothing, nothing.

**Miner:** Well, thank you so much, Keith. I do appreciate it.

**Crotz:** Thank you. It was my pleasure.

END TRANSCRIPT