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Lynda Duke

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Oral History Interview with Lynda Duke,
in Hansen Student Center, February 23rd, 2016
Conducted by Meg Miner, Illinois Wesleyan University Archivist

Meg Miner: Good afternoon. This-

Lynda Duke: Good afternoon.

Miner: This is Meg Miner. I'm the archivist at Illinois Wesleyan University and today is the 23rd of February and we're in the Hansen Center discussing Minor Meyers, his presidency, and the influences...that he had on the university possibly through the lenses of some of his collecting interests. With me today is Lynda Duke. Lynda, please introduce yourself and tell us a little bit about how you're affiliated with Wesleyan and Minor.

Duke: Good afternoon. My name is Lynda Duke and I have been at Illinois Wesleyan fifteen years in August. And I am a full professor in the library, currently acting as associate dean until the end of next academic year. And I came to campus at kind of a unique time. The (name of library, 1:00??) Library was being packed up to move to the Ames Library- a new Ames library and I had one semester in (name of library, 1:09??) and my office was in an empty storage closet. [Miner laughs] And my int- my first introduction to Minor was through his excitement about the new Ames Library.

Miner: Okay. Do you recall what his...his interests were, his goals were, his philosophies were about libraries?

Duke: Any book, every book, each book had value. And...you know, he clearly pursued his passions through his collections of books. And I never had the occasion to chat with him about it, but- but clearly that was a love of his.

Miner: So just to restate that then, his passion for books it sounds like you are thinking it translated into his passion for books in our libraries.

Duke: Oh absolutely. You know, I'm sure you've heard of the story of where he came in and took away the withdraw stamp from-

Miner: I did hear that story, but there's a little bit of a conflict on who he took it away from.

Duke: Someone in tech services. I don't know, it was a staff member.

Miner: So before you came or after you came?

Duke: Before. Before I came.

Miner: Okay.

Duke: Absolutely before. And my understanding was he was- he was horrified by the thought that any book would be withdrawn, and so therefore he withdrew the with- withdraw stamp. But I don't really know, Sue (last name, 2:48??) may know more about that.

Miner: May have more information on that. So I've heard that story, and one of things I was curious about was that taking away a stamp doesn't-

Duke: Doesn't [laughs]-

Miner:-make it so that you can't withdraw things or you have to withdraw things. Do you know if that was actually like effective-

Duke: I do know-

Miner: -in doing its purpose?

Duke: -that there was no weeding- unless I missed it, there was no weeding done to the collection at all until maybe four years ago, five years ago. With, you know, any-

Miner: Okay.

Duke: -certainly when I weeded the business collection and took out literally thousands of books I think that was the first major culling that had been done.

Miner: So, even on- on the pack up and move over here which even in our personal lives is always a good time to reassess our collections, nothing like that happened. Nothing was part of the process there.

Duke: No, again I came in- in August and we moved in December.

Miner: Oh gosh, I didn't know it was that quick!

Duke: Yes, I was literally on campus for one semester, but as part of that long, incredibly in-time intensive and work intensive period, there was- as I was aware of, there was no weeding, there was no throwing away, it was everything got boxed up and moved.

Miner: Sure, okay. Well, what do you remember about the importance of the book sales? And the- the reason that you agreed to participate in, I'll just say, is for our memories here, is you were involved as outreach librarian, was that your capacity then?

Duke: Mm-hmm, mm-hmm.

Miner: Okay...to organize, or plan, or [overlapping] conduct, or-

Duke: To organize, coordinate, plan, oversee the book fairs and Iw- I had completely forgotten about that work. I inherited that task. I believe Marcia Thomas had it before me.

Miner: Mm-hmm.

Duke: And I- I think she was quite happy to hand it over to me. [Miner laughs] And I did it- if I came on 2001, I don't know that I did it my first year. But I certainly did it for three or four years after that, but I couldn't even tell you last year that- I know we ended it shortly after President Myers' death. So I inherited it, and it was a- it was held at the Shirk center, I don't know how much detail you would like.

Miner: As much as you want to give.

Duke: It was held at the Shirk center, and it was...my job was to contact the list of vendors who had been- who had participated the year before. There were probably...forty or fifty.

Miner: Wow!

Duke: And they were charged a minimum amount, you know like forty or fifty dollars or something, and we provided a space and tables and chairs and we advertised the event. And I'm thinking we might have charged a minimal fee for people to come through. But even that I just cannot remember.

Miner: Sure.

Duke: And so it was a Saturday. And I'm really racking my brains here whether it was a Saturday and a Sunday event. And people came and they sold their old books and their antique

books, and their book paraphernalia and it was a- it was really I don't think attended at all by students on campus.

Miner: Hmm.

Duke: Perhaps some faculty, but it was mostly community members who attended.

Miner: Was it good turnouts?

Duke: Mm-hmm. Yeah...I think that...as I recall in the three or four years that I did it, the number of vendors actually decreased in part because the vendors either became too old and ill to attend or died, because you know it was- it's kind of an elderly profession. Like people who are elderly tend to be in that profession for whatever reason, it appeared to be.

Miner: Hmm.

Duke: And it was something that was clearly a favorite event for President Myers. And I don't know what the cost was to the university, but I think that there was definitely a cost. [Miner laughs] Certainly my time and other people's time in addition to the space, etcetera. And so I think the decision was made after he passed that it wasn't something that the university had a desire to continue.

Miner: But it was an add-on to your regular work?

Duke: Oh yes.

Miner: And was it other people besides the library or- or-

Duke: Well, physical plant of course would have been involved in setting up, university communications in helping to publicize, and I did all the coordination. I did all the contacting of vendors and coordinating and I was there throughout the sales, I remember. And...and then did a follow-up survey- evaluation for feedback from each of the vendors.

Miner: Hmm. [overlapping] Were they pleased with the-

Duke: [overlapping] It was positive, yeah, yeah.

Miner: So it was a positive experience for them if nobody else.

Duke: It was, it was.

Miner: Okay. I never thought about that. So, nobody else from the library?

Duke: As I said, I believe Marcia Thomas-

Miner: But like when you were running it, were other people from the library involved or-

Duke: Not that I recall, and if there were and I'm forgetting, I really apologize. But I can...that's not true now that I'm thinking about it. We used to have a staff member who I can picture and she was with us and she helped out. She was here for a short- she was a short time.

Miner: Sure.

Duke: And she...before Renee (last name, 9:18??).

Miner: Mm-hmm.

Duke: There was someone else.

Miner: Okay. Well, I- the point of the question is was it a library-wide effort or was- was minimal-

Duke: You know, it was my responsibility, yeah.

Miner: So nobody else was really responsible for it.

Duke: No.

Miner: And the vendors would have taken care of their own money things so there wouldn't have been anybody from business office that was involved with them in that.

Duke: Mm-mmm.

Miner: Okay.

Duke: Yeah. And I think we did charge a slight admission of a couple of dollars because I'm remembering some students being at the front desk in a front area where people would come in, but you know, if I remember anything useful I'll let you know.

Miner: [laughs] Okay. So that kind of event, I- I don't know what the purpose was in starting it other than perhaps President Myers' interest in books?

Duke: Yeah, I think he wanted to share his love of old books with the community and help anyone who was interested in old books...[Miner laughs]...pursue it.

Miner: Well, one of the reasons these days that we talk about having those kinds of events on campus is to raise the visibility of campus, to bring, presumably bring some benefit to the institution. Do you have a perspective on whether or not that would have been the case?

Duke: Well, as I noted, there- I- there were just very, very, very few students who participated in it or attended. Not many faculty or staff- and so I think- I think there was a financial cost to the university and certainly physical plant's time because they had to protect the floor, you know, set up tables, etcetera. My guess is- and I don't remember if a- we kept track of attendance and it may have been there was a fall off in attendance as well. You know, I- I just don't remember. And so I think that the decision- and I remember having these conversations with Sue (last name, 11:29??). I think ultimately it was decided that the cost- resource cost faculty and staff time, whatever financial obligations there were, out- outweighed the benefits in terms of promoting the university.

Miner: Okay. But that wasn't until after Minor's- until after his death.

Duke: It wasn't- yeah, there was no conversation about cancelling the event while he was alive.

Miner: You want to make an observation about why? I mean it sounds like [overlapping] everybody knew.

Duke: I mean, it was 'cause it was his baby.

Miner: Okay.

Duke: And he enjoyed it and was interested in it and I don't know because I wasn't privy to any- any conversation within administration, but certainly my sense from the library was you know, this was- this was going to happen.

Miner: And because the president said it was. Okay. You have a unique position, being a campus leader at this stage. And I mean the whole...the- the connection of what libraries are supposed to do for their campuses and what donors, benefactors, administrators can ask of us to do on our campus. Is that something you observe just in the library or found that kind of pressure to- to...make President Myers' vision for books a reality? Was that- was that unique-

Duke: You know-

Miner: -you think?

Duke: -I think...I wasn't here when the book fair was begun.

Miner: Mm-hmm.

Duke: So I have no idea what those conversations looked like at first, whether it was a joint project with the library, whether it was...something that Minor Myers really- really pushed for and I don't know what those initial conversations looked like. And I would imagine Sue (last name, 13:46??) or Marcia Thomas would have a much better sense of...[coughs]...the library's enthusiasm or investment in the book fair. And it was also in a different time in the university's history in terms of- of perceived or real financial pressures or understandings. And it was also a different time in higher education. I think we're in a very different situation now in- in terms of- of those things. So I can't speak to the library's initial...thoughts on participating. I can say that, you know, my first year or two of- of doing it I was fine to do it, I was new...[Miner laughs]...I didn't know the landscape and you doing what you're asked to do. It did always seem to me like a disconnect from what the library's mission was and the university's mission. There- there didn't to me seem to be the alignment there.

Miner: Sure.

Duke: But again, I was relatively new to the campus.

Miner: But this was after- let me see, there was a campus strategic planning that would have been done before your time, and it was I think even before the major library strategic plan, re-revision that happened in 2004, I think.

Duke: Mm-hmm.

Miner: So yeah.

Duke: Yeah, I don't know and I- I honestly can't even remember what year it began and how long it- it went.

Miner: Yeah. So, somebody like Minor who had a very exuberant personality and- and from what I understand shared his enthusiasm with a lot of things in a lot of corners of the campus,

you know, in retrospect when you think about him and his time here, what do you think the impact of that kind of a person would have on Illinois Wesleyan?

Duke: Well, I think it meant different things for different people. One never quite knew when- when you went to his house for an event what books he would have out to show, you know, in my remembrances he would always have...different books that he had recently acquired that he had wanted- that he would show a certain person 'cause he knew of their interests.

Miner: Hmm.

Duke: I remember at the end of one reception he brought out a- a cookbook in German and talked with (name, 16:32??) about it. So I think he was making those personal connections through the books.

Miner: Hmm.

Duke: You know, he knew so and so was interested in this aspect of their discipline and he'd come across something and then he'd- he'd share it with them. And that was how he- how he reached out and made connections. And- and I think that probably for faculty that was a nice affirmation of- of their interests and their research and their scholarly endeavors.

Miner: Hmm.

Duke: Students...my guess is that...students were...it left an impression on students when he would stop them on the quad and talk about their passions and what they were interested in and- and making whatever connections he could. My guess is students would remember that.

Miner: Did he do that with you?

Duke: [laughs] One of my favorite memories is- on this campus is when we opened the library in January of 2002. As- you weren't here at that point, were you?

Miner: Nope, October.

Duke: So we had really worked a lot of hours over the fall and well, prior to me being here people had worked many hours for many years to make it happen. But during the fall and over the chris- winter break, we had just worked hours and hours and hours just to get everything together to move it over. And the morning- we had put up pieces of paper on the front doors so that people couldn't look in. [Miner laughs] I don't remember why we did that, but we did. And I remember that morning taking the papers down and I stood outside as we opened and Minor

Myers came up the steps. He was one of the first if not the first person in the library that day...[Miner laughs]...when we opened. And he was so thrilled and he was- it was clear it was a dream come true for him on so many levels. And I'll never forget that moment 'cause it was exciting and it was special and it was...clearly he had invested time and energy and a vision and his passion and here it was, open for people to- to come into and explore and- and learn and grow. And so I have a very special place in my heart for Ames Library and for Miner because they're all- they're intertwined for me.

Miner: Of course, yeah. And to be there at the beginning, what a- what a phenomenal treat.

Duke: And then of course, three weeks later there was the sprinkler. [laughs]

Miner: Not such a great treat!

Duke: But anyway, it's fun for me to see the library still so loved and so well-used and...and it's a- I think he would be thrilled with the collection on the fourth floor. And I think it's- it's a fitting remembrance for him.

Miner: Many people stop there. Mm-hmm. Do you think he would have liked the way libraries have moved today-

Duke: Hmm.

Miner:-away from books and into electronics?

Duke: I wouldn't begin to speak for him 'cause we never talked about that at all, but I would- my sense is that would not be a- a change that he- he would welcome or that he could relate to. I think for him it was the whole experience of holding the manuscript, the book, turning the pages, smelling it, look at the cover...[Miner laughs]...all of that to me spoke to him in- in the little that I knew him. And so it's- as we know, it's not the same-

Miner: Sure.

Duke: -clicking on a button. I think he would have been fascinated- I think he would have been fascinated most likely by what he could have explored, things he could have engage-engaged with and- and been able to read and- and learn about at the click of a button. That aspect would have been highly satisfying for him, my guess is but in a very different way than how he related to the physical...[Miner laughs]...item.

Miner: Do you recall him ever using the library after it opened? (unsure, 21:40-21:41??)

Duke: I-it's funny because I do remember him talking on one occasion about him being over at his house, the president's house, and looking over and seeing the glow of the lights from the library and how- how deeply satisfying that was to- to know that there students and minds and people- and people thinking and exploring.

Miner: Oh, that's great that he put it that way. Yeah.

Duke: And I do- yeah, actually now that I think about it, I'd come around a corner and there he'd be in the stacks or...walking out with- with books. Yeah, I guess I do remember that.

Miner: You just made me think about something I hadn't thought about before. I wonder if the library is where it is because it could be seen from the president's house. [laughs]

Duke: I don't know-

Miner: I guess I'll have to look.

Duke: -but he certainly- he certainly could look across and see.

Miner: Yeah.

Duke: And of course this was back in the day when library faculty worked 1 to 10 on Sundays with reference and once a week 6 to 10pm and so...yeah.

Miner: Huh. So you might see him there in the evenings and- is that what you're saying? Is that why you're recalling that?

Duke: No, I guess because when I would leave at night, I would see his house aglow. [laughs]

Miner: Aglow. Sure on your way out. [laughs]

Duke: Yeah, but- but I would park by his house all the- 'cause, you know, in the evening there was more parking than during the day.

Miner: So true.

Duke: Yeah.

Miner: How do you think he would have felt about the auction of his books? Do you know how the university acquired them?

Duke: You know, I- I was not...too aware of what was going on. I knew- I knew he had a collection. Everything was so sudden and difficult. I think it was difficult for everyone involved. I really don't have- I- I- I really have no idea how he would view the auction of his materials or his books. My guess is he would ultimately just hope that every book found a good home.

Miner: [laughs] That's a great way to put it. Are there other things you think of that you can share?

Duke: No. It's- it's funny to think that I've been around long enough to have a, you know, memories of something in the past like that- like this topic. Yeah, thanks for the opportunity.

Miner: Thanks for sharing, I really appreciate it. If you think of anybody else that I should talk to, let me know, 'kay?

Duke: Yes, I will.

Miner: Thanks a lot.

Duke: Thanks.