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Oral History Interview with Sarah Florentine,
Conducted over Skype, April 25th, 2016
Conducted by Meg Miner, Illinois Wesleyan Archivist

Meg Miner: Well good morning! This is Meg Miner and I am the archivist at Illinois Wesleyan University, and I am on a sabbatical project looking at the Minor Myers era on our campus and talking with people who knew and have insight into his leadership and his- and his collecting interests and how sort of all of that came together and worked in Illinois Wesleyan's history. So today is April the 25th and- 2016, and I am on a Skype to phone conversation with an alumna of our institution. Sarah, would you please introduce yourself?

Sarah Florentine: My name is Sarah Florentine. I graduated from Illinois Wesleyan in 2004. My name then- my maiden name was Sarah (last name unsure, possibly Vale, 0:53??). And I met- I guess if you want to go on and say that, Minor Myers in the spring of 2001. I believe it was the second semester of my sophomore year. And I was a history major and working on my sophomore seminar project- with Dr. Young and had just sort of applied for and got accepted to do a summer internship with Dr. Marcia Young who ran the David Davis Mansion. And she- what she wanted out of my internship was a published material, some- something that they could sell in their gift shop that dealt with or incorporated all of the correspondence that they had between Sarah Davis and Judge David Davis. They had all these letters that Sarah and Judge David Davis would write back and forth to each other and Marcia thought it would be a great opportunity to put something together that reflected on what it was like for Sarah to run the David Davis mansion, the estate and hopefully something they could sell in their gift shop. So what we came up with was that I would put together a- sort of a guide to living in that era, to running an estate that would be intermixed with some authentic recipes from that time, from authentic cookbooks from that time, 'cause Sarah talked a lot about cooking and running- running the household and so on and so forth so that if someone were visiting the David Davis mansion they could take this little souvenir home and maybe even attempt to replicate some of the recipes or tips that was very much a part of everyday life at that time. So I had the letters from Dr. Young and I needed the authentic recipes. So I was kind of trying to do a two birds with one stone things here and knowing this internship was coming up that I was going to incorporate part of it in my sophomore seminar- use my soph- sophomore seminar as sort of a jumping point, so my sophomore seminar research paper...I decided to concentrate on cookbooks of that time period to sort of give me the research that I would need to do this project in the summer for the David Davis mansion. And I think- I don't remember exactly but I think probably Dr. Young- the professor, Professor Young, who told me that Minor Myers had this unique collection of 18th century cookbooks, 19th- 18th, 19th century cookbooks that I could possibly use or would be great if I could somehow get my hands on parts of them to do my research. So again, I think I sent an email to President Myers, and I remember not being very confident that I would hear

back. I mean, this was years ago, first of all, so email wasn't as prolific as it is now. I wasn't even sure if he checked his email. [Miner laughs] But I'm not- I'm not a pick up a phone kind of person I guess I'm a little bit more reserved in that so "I'll shoot for an email first and see if anything happens." But I wasn't very confident that I would even get a response. So I don't- I don't remember about how much time had passed or if it was fairly quickly, but I do remember getting a phone call. It was probably sometime between 7:30 or 8 in the morning, which is just might as well be the middle of the night for a college student...[Miner laughs]...and I picked up the phone and I often remember very grumpily answering it 'cause that was my strategy. I mean, no one I know would be calling me at this- this time so it must be some kind of telemarketer or somebody I don't want to speak to. So having that already displayed in my voice or whatever and it was President Myers, wanting to talk about the cookbooks and my cookbook project and so we chatted for a little bit after I tried to wake up quickly...[Miner laughs]...and he said he would have- he would go through his collection and he would have a stack of them waiting in his office that I could come by and pick up. So we set up a time and I went over to his office and we met very briefly. He kind of talked about cookbooks and what he had, and you know, I don't remember a whole ton about the conversation, it was very brief and he was busy. But he hands me this stack of rare cookbooks...[Miner laughs]...and said, "Good luck!" or "Let me know how it goes!" or whatever. So I had this stack of probably rare collectable books sitting in my dorm room for the rest of that semester and then took- I think may have took some of them home with me over the summer. I'm actually a local, I'm from Bloomington-Normal.

Miner: Okay.

Florentine: And- let's see, so I completed the sophomore seminar project and I rolled that research into this cookbook for the internship at the David Davis mansion. And I thought it went- I thought it went well. I mean, Marcia Young was really pleased with it. I- I think they still sell it. I checked- I used to check up on it every once in a while. It used to advertised on their web- web page. And I think I looked just a few months ago and it was listed as items they sell but not as- not as advertised. So basically it was I would take something from Sarah's letters that she would mention doing specifically, like whether it was- oh my gosh, it's been so long since I've thought about this project...[Miner laughs]...but rolling taffy or something like that. So then I would go into the cookbooks and find an authentic recipe for whatever she was talking about doing. And I would couple the little vignette, the little story with the...recipe. And- and it had sections. There was a section on cleaning I think and just sort of general home, home, assortment of home references, but the- the- the pattern or- the book took. So whenever I was all done with the cookbooks, I- I probably sent him another email or stopped by his office or something and- and dropped the books back off to him. So I didn't have a lot of interaction with- with President Myers. I mean, he called me on the phone and he did meet with me very briefly but his cookbooks were obviously valuable to what I was doing in- in light of your project which you told me about how collections affect others, I didn't think of it at the time. I mean, I thought it

was awesome to be so open to a- to a student doing that, but really as collectors we- we collect things and we put them on a shelf or in a bookcase and you know, he- he not only trusted me but he also allowed his collection to really do much more than sit on the shelf. And I never really thought about it that way until- until I read the little blurb about your own project, how he wasn't afraid to let his collection be used, which really I guess it should be so that it could, you know, teach someone or teach many someones, hopefully-

Miner: That's wonderful.

Florentine: -and just allow to enjoy- allow them to enjoy what he enjoyed about cookbooks. I don't know any- I don't know why he started collecting cookbooks. I don't remember if he told me, I don't remember. But you know, he probably just found them interesting. I'm sure Dr.- both of the Dr. Youngs, Marcia or my professor Young might be able to talk more about why he had an interest in cookbooks...[laughs]...because I know they knew him-

Miner: Yeah.

Florentine: -very well. So that's pretty much my story, I guess. (unsure, 9:33??)

Miner: That's great, that's a great story. And what's great about it is...there are students who've mentioned him showing them books, but you're the only...alumna who have mentioned that they have borrowed books to do research. There's one other faculty member-

Florentine: Mm-hmm.

Miner: -and she was an adjunct faculty member who also was an alum from an earlier time, and she mentioned having conversations with him about why he collected those books. And she used some for some doctoral work she was doing. But besides- besides the two of you, no one else has talked about...[Florentine laughs]...these parts of his collection.

Florentine: Mm-hmm.

Miner: And we actually- this is part of his collection that we ended up keeping, so they're still available in special collections for students. But I love that you-

Florentine: Oh great!

Miner: -that you made a bridge from the letters and conversations in the letters into the recipes. So were his books then American cookbooks that you were using?

Florentine: Yes.

Miner: Okay.

Florentine: Yes, I believe so. Yeah, I tried to be as authentic as possible so that they really were not just a “Oh, this could be a recipe!” but really something that time- I would have all that written down and it’d be- be documented in the- in my publication as well. I wonder if I can grab which books I actually used-

Miner: [laughs] Yeah, I- I saw-

Florentine: -since I have that.

Miner: -the website reference to your books and I have not gone to get it yet but I certainly will look for that.

Florentine: Yeah I have- I have my own copy-

Miner: Okay. Of course.

Florentine: -to find it, but I can certainly email you the cookbooks that I actually used ‘cause I would definitely have that.

Miner: Oh, that would be fun! Yeah, that would be fine.

Florentine: It doesn’t matter, you could get a copy.

Miner: Sure, if you have time. So are you a collector? You said we as collectors we put things on our shelves. [both laugh]

Florentine: No, I don’t think I have a specific collection. I am actually a military spouse.

Miner: Okay.

Florentine: So I- we move so often that I probably try to rid myself of stuff as much as possible. But I like to collect- I mean, you know I collect memories, and I do- you know, I’m a pretty nostalgic person so I do have a fair amount of things that I’ve held onto because they’re precious to me. But I don’t have a set- a set collection I guess I would say like cookbooks or anything of that sort.

Miner: Okay. I just thought you'd- it came up so I thought I would ask.

Florentine: Yeah, I guess we as in society. [laughs] But-

Miner: But anyways, I think you're story is great and Dr. Mike Young- I did talk to him and he said I should talk to you and I told him we had already had an email exchange at that point so he was very excited to hear that.

Florentine: Mm-hmm.

Miner: And I did realize-

Florentine: Oh good.

Miner: -that this was for your sophomore seminar project so that's a-

Florentine: Yeah, so it started out as my sophomore seminar, mm-hmm.

Miner: Yeah.

Florentine: Well then I sort of tried to do it on purpose. I knew I was going to be doing all this research into cookbooks and I think I even talked to him about it...because I was going into this internship so I tried hard about that I guess, so that's where it originated.

Miner: That's very clever! [both laugh] So when- when you emailed Minor then and he called you back, had you given him a- a number or did he just call you in the dorm?

Florentine: He had just called me in the dorm. I- I don't know if I had left my number or if he had looked me up. This is, again, pre-cell phones-

Miner: Right, yeah.

Florentine: -what do you do?

Miner: Yeah!

Florentine: But you know, the dorms- the dorm phone-

Miner: Yeah.

Florentine: So it could have been anyone- pre-caller ID really-

Miner: Yeah.

Florentine: I guess they had caller ID, we didn't have it in the dorms. So I had no idea who was on the other line.

Miner: That was funny. Well Sarah, this is a really great story and like I said, I- I think it's a- I think it's a wonderful addition because it's something that you did use and- and reflected on at the time you were a student, so thank you so much for doing that. Is there anything else you can think of you'd like to share?

Florentine: No, I think that about sums it up. But I think it's just a great project and I know that Minor Myers, you talked about just looking in his era, you know, I was- I was glad to have gone to school when he was president and I remember him speaking at my freshman- freshman... convocation, opening, whatever they call it. And one of his quotes actually has made it- has made itself into some memorabilia in the Bloomington-Normal area. My mom sent me a magnet I think she got at the Garlic Press. Are you- are you local to Bloomington-Normal?

Miner: No, but I certainly know the Garlic Press.

Florentine: Okay. [laughs] Yeah, I wasn't sure. I thought- I think you had said something about being on the east coast and but then, you know, Wesleyan obviously. So one of his quotes that I remember him saying my freshman year was the, "Go into the world and do well, but more importantly go into the world and do good." That was like a play on words too so he probably had me at that moment. But my mom sent me a little magnet, so it sits at my desk-

Miner: Oh that's nice! Now you see now, that's-

Florentine: -that she got at the Garlic Press.

Miner: -the first time I've heard that he said that at freshman convocation. He- I know he said it at-

Florentine: I believe it was our- I think it was our freshman convo- I don't know, I could be wrong. It's been years. But I thought- I have memories of being in the Shirk center and it being freshman year and him saying it and even my parents were there, I think cause I'm local so they came I think to the freshman convocation. I don't remember it from graduation, especially since our graduation was cut drastically short because of a impending thunderstorm that decided to roll

in at the last minute and I don't even remember Dr.- or President Myers speaking at that graduation really.

Miner: He was actually deceased by then so-

Florentine: So anyway, that's my memory but-

Miner: Yeah.

Florentine: Oh, was he?

Miner: Yeah.

Florentine: When did he- oh, that'd be why.

Miner: Yeah. He died in-

Florentine: That'd be why I don't remember him speaking.

Miner: Yeah, he died in 2003 so-

Florentine: Oh yeah, yeah. That- well, that would be why I don't have any memories of him speaking at my graduation. So yeah, I believe it was freshman convocation.

Miner: Okay, well that's great to hear that.

Florentine: Anyway, I don't know (unsure, 16:02-16:05??) but you know, memories, so...[laughs]...

Miner: It's all of a piece and- and hopefully in aggregate everyone's memory...[Florentine laughs]...will help us leave some interesting stories here.

Florentine: Yes, yes.

Miner: Well Sarah, thank you so much. I appreciate you bearing with me on the technology and time issues. And I wish you the best of luck out there, you and your family, so take good care.

Florentine: Thank you. Thank you.

Miner: Alright, have a great day!

Florentine: You too. Bye.

Miner: Bye.