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Barbara Ford

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Oral History Interview with Barbara Ford,
February 11, 2016
Conducted by Meg Miner, Illinois Wesleyan Archivist

Meg Miner: Good afternoon!

Barbara Ford: Hello!

Miner: My name is Meg Miner, and I am the archivist at Illinois Wesleyan University. Today is February 11th, and this is an oral history interview with a distinguished alumna of Illinois Wesleyan. Barbara, if you could introduce yourself and tell us how you are affiliated.

Ford: I am Barbara Ford, and I graduated from Illinois Wesleyan in 1968 with a degree in history and education. Umm I stayed in touch with the university because other members of my family have graduated from there, and I – when I was president of the American Library Association, Illinois Wesleyan recommend – recognized me as one of their distinguished alumni, so I think that's – those are the important things.

Miner: Those are those touchstones.

Ford: Yeah.

Miner: And how did you know President Myers? What context did you meet him or become acquainted with him?

Ford: Well, going to receipt- alumni receptions, whether in at the university or in other places, so I met him several times these various receptions.

Miner: And did you have occasion to speak with him about libraries and –

Ford: I would say I had several informal occasions to speak with him about libraries. Nothing terribly in depth or long.

Miner: Did you get a sense of what his philosophy or approach to academic libraries were?

Ford: Well, he certainly seemed very interested in libraries and aware of their importance for the kind of institution that Illinois Wesleyan was and the kind of education that they hope to deliver, so I think, you know, he-he was a book person. He was knowledgeable about books and the importance of the artifact and information.

Miner: And so, you got the sense of he definitely was more interested in the artifact of the book rather than in some of the electronic resources that were available.

Ford: That was certainly my impression.

Miner: Okay. [laughs]

Ford: You know, that he was a traditional, for lack of a better way to say it but personal –
Miner: Right.

Ford: -bookman.

Miner: Right. So, i-in the way that that manifested in his life –

Ford: Ah-huh.

Miner: -was through his collections. He was certainly not –

Ford: Ah-huh. Ah-huh.

Miner: -averse to technology. He used –

Ford: No. Uh-uh.

Miner: -eBay [laughs] extensively from what –

Ford: Yeah.

Miner: -I can see.

Ford: Yeah. Right.

Miner: Umm but did you – are you a collector yourself?

Ford: Not –

Miner: No?

Ford: Not a serious collector. No.

Miner: Okay. And one of the first things that he's – I am – I am hearing he asked a lot of people was "what do you collect?"

Ford: Yeah.

Miner: So –

Ford: Yeah.

Miner: Did you get a sense from him – did you ever have any conversations with him about his collecting interests?

Ford: Not really. No.

Miner: No? Okay...about his particular areas of interest in academia or –

Ford: I talked – when I talked with him most, it was about libraries –

Miner: Okay.

Ford: -and their importance in educational institutions and so forth, so not really about specific books or particular areas of information.

Miner: So, libraries as place?

Ford: Yes. Aha.

Miner: Okay.

Ford: Uh-huh.

Miner: And –

Ford: And as important for education, especially liberal arts and sciences undergraduate education.

Miner: Okay. Did you get a sense of how he might have defined the liberal arts –

Ford: No. No.

Miner: -as an educational focus? Okay. So, the building of the library would have occurred – would have been being planned.

Ford: Right.

Miner: The Ames library would have been – was planned during the time that you were meeting him or wherever –

Ford: Right

Miner: -you were.

Ford: Exactly.

Miner: Did you have any conversations with uh him or anybody else about planning that library?

Ford: Some very general conversations with him and with the university librarian at the time. You know, it – it seemed like, from an outsider, there was kind of a rush up job; they wanted to

get this thing planned and built. You know, no messing around, so I don't think that umm there were as many conversations as there might have been, but I think it worked out fine, and you know, I don't think he sought my council –

Miner: Hmm.

Ford: -on those kinds of things, but I could be wrong.

Miner: Sure. So the planning of the library – I mean you are a donor. Thank you for –

Ford: Uh-huh.

Miner: -being a donor for our wonderful-

Ford: Uh-huh. Sure.

Miner: -library. Umm the – those conversations have - would have taken place with advancement and–

Ford: Yeah.

Miner: -and not necessarily Minor?

Ford: Yeah.

Miner: Right. Right.

Ford: Yeah. Yeah.

Miner: Because it – one of the things that I am curious about is how much influence he had over the makeup of the collection –

Ford: Uh-huh. Uh-huh.

Miner: Certainly, I know the building was-was his dream –

Ford: Uh-huh. Uh-huh.

Miner: -for the campus, right?

Ford: Uh-huh. Uh-huh.

Miner: One of his interests in it but –

Ford: Right.

Miner: But also the-the content in it, so the-there's a big focus on physical collection.

Ford: Ah-huh. Ah-huh.

Miner: I mean by-by design.

Ford: Yeah, right.

Miner: You know, by-by –

Ford: Exactly. Yeah.

Miner: Uh –

Ford: Yeah.

Miner: And a special collections area –

Ford: Right.

Miner: -that I understood to be sort of an afterthought.

Ford: Oh really?

Miner: -which was interesting to me –

Ford: Mm-hmm. Mm-hmm.

Miner: -because of his interests in –

Ford: Yeah. Yeah, I would have thought that would have been –

Miner: -acquiring.

Ford: -right up front!

Miner: And – yeah. So, those-those kinds of umm conversations about the-the library building or the planning when you –

Ford: Not –

Miner: -had –

Ford: Not any in depth conversations.

Miner: Sure.

Ford: No.

Miner: Okay, and you've been back since?

Ford: Oh yes.

Miner: Yeah?

Ford: Aha. Ah-huh. I've been back. I was in – well, I was invited to the ground breaking to be one of the people who umm – I think we were there for the dedication. I was invited back for one of the anniversaries but couldn't go. So yeah, so I have been there several times. I-I mean both be as an alum and also with the job that I had here at the Mortenson Center for International Library Programs where we often brought visiting international librarians to visit the library because it's such a nice scale, and such a beautiful building, and the librarians were so good at talking to our visitors about what we did. So, yeah, so, I have been there a number of times.

Miner: I was there for a couple of those.

Ford: Ah.

Miner: It was great fun.

Ford: Yeah –

Miner: They have –

Ford: It is fun. Yeah. Uh-huh.

Miner: - so many different people and –

Ford: Right.

Miner: And get the different perspectives.

Ford: Right. Uh-huh.

Miner: I think it's one of the things that Wesleyan does pretty well is bringing in or-or having a sort of outward looking –

Ford: Yeah. Yeah.

Miner: - interest in the world, so –

Ford: Yeah, for a private school I think they do- do that well.

Miner: Becau-

Ford: Uh-huh.

Miner: Yeah. So, they – the library collections that we have now – of course the-the nature of academic libraries has changed I think quite a bit –

Ford: Ah. Ah-huh. Ah-huh.

Miner: -and in the last thirteen years since Minor's death. One of the feedback pieces that we get on from faculty on campus is how we are not as interested in books anymore–

Ford: Uh-huh.

Miner: And how –

Ford: Right. Right.

Miner: You know, Minor would just think that would be terrible.

Ford: Uh-huh. Uh-huh.

Miner: And I – I was wondering if maybe you could reflect because you do have such a-a broad focus on –

Ford: Uh-huh.

Miner: -librarianship –

Ford: Mm-hmm. Mm-hmm.

Miner: -and the changing nature- certainly of academic libraries generally, but at a place like Illinois Wesleyan –

Ford: Uh-huh. Uh-huh. Uh-huh.

Miner: -and the communities that they serve.

Ford: Yeah. Yeah. Well, I think that just like- I just read some place that 92% of college students prefer printed books.

Miner: Ah-huh.

Ford: So, I think that the book as an artifact and in its traditional format is still quite popular and sought after by people of all ages.

Miner: Uh-huh.

Ford: At least that's what the research shows.

Miner: Mm-hmm.

Ford: My own teaching and interaction with undergraduates doesn't necessarily agree with that.

Miner: Hmmm. Interesting.

Ford: I think that they tend to like things in electronic format because they can get them anytime, anywhere, and it's-it's just – it's a way – a different way of accessing things that-that they seemed to like. I think that, you know, it's – we-we don't really know yet, I think, what the full impact of all of this is.

Miner: Aha.

Ford: And umm I think that many of us appreciate the variety of formats and are awfully glad that that's there, and I am – I think, personally, that part of being an educated person is understanding that information comes in different forms and that how you use and evaluate it and find it varies, and I think that a place like Wesleyan has a real responsibility to be sure that students understand that.

Miner: Yeah.

Ford: That – [coughs] you don't find information in only one format, and that to be an educated person, you need to know about all of these.

Miner: Yeah.

Ford: And I think you are still working on that, and I-I guess one of the things I wonder about Minor is my understanding with him - one of the reasons he wanted a new library is that Illinois Wesleyan wanted to be Phi Beta Kappa, wanted to attract, you know, better students, better faculty, and he felt that was very important for that.

Miner: Ah-huh.

Ford: And I don't know if that's true.

Miner: I've heard that too.

Ford: So –

Miner: Yeah.

Ford: -and so, that I – but I think, you know, coming from the era he did, he probably had maybe a different idea of what that meant than we might today.

Miner: Ah-huh.

Ford: You know, I-I don't know about his use of electronics—

Miner: Mm-hmm. Mm-hmm.

Ford: I haven't really talked with him about that. So, I think that whatever the aim was, he did the institution a fabulous favor –

Miner: Mm-hmm.

Ford: By having a decent library. You know, back when I was a student, the library was in the Buck building. The-the library between that and the new one was never a great building.

Miner: Hmm.

Ford: It was- you know, it-it was okay.

Miner: Ah-huh.

Ford: But this, I think, is a fine library.

Miner: Ah-huh.

Ford: That everyone can be proud of, and I think it's – I don't know what else for the university, but I think it's a fine legacy.

Miner: Yeah, and it's very versatile, too.

Ford: Right.

Miner: So, it's been –

Ford: Yes.

Miner: That's been able to be adapted I can't even –

Ford: Yeah. Yeah.

Miner: -think of how many times.

Ford: And-And I think a lot of that's due to the librarian –

Miner: Mm-hmm.

Ford: -and the people who did the planning.

Miner: Yep.

Ford: And – well, I am sure he had his fingers in some of that. I – I am mean it definitely has the touch of people who knew what they were doing.

Miner: Yeah.

Ford: So, you know, he did not push it any particular way.

Miner: Mm-hmm.

Ford: I guess, and –

Miner: Mm-hmm.

Ford: It's – I mean it's a – it's an attractive building, and it seems to be very serviceable

Miner: Mm-hmm. Did you know Clayton Highum? Do you- do you know what happened to him or? I mean he left Illinois Wesleyan –

Ford: Aha.

Miner: -right before Sue...Anderson –

Ford: Uh-huh .

Miner: -came.

Ford: Ah-huh. Ah-huh.

Miner: Were you, I guess, i-it certainly – I don't know when his start date was as university librarian.

Ford: Aha. Aha –

Miner: But umm I have no recollection necessarily of him.

Ford: No, I know him professionally. I didn't really know him so much through Wesleyan. But, yeah, I –

Miner: Is he still –

Ford: I think he's died.

Miner: Professionally? Okay.

Ford: I think he's died.

Miner: I have trying to find out.

Ford: Yeah. I am pretty sure he died.

Miner: Because he was there at a key –

Ford: Yeah. Right.

Miner: -point in the library history on Illinois–

Ford: Right. Right.

Miner: Wesleyan's campus.

Ford: Right. Uh-huh.

Miner: Okay. Well, umm so the university – one of the things that I told you – as I told you I was writing about is the auction and that the university –

Ford: Uh-huh

Miner: -actually purchased that collection from Minor's family and –

Ford: Okay.

Miner: So, one of the things that I – not a lot of people know that.

Ford: Aha. Yeah.

Miner: They –

Ford: Uh-huh

Miner: They think it was gifted.

Ford: Uh-huh. Uh-huh.

Miner: It's very important to me to leave a written record that-that this –

Ford: Was purchased.

Miner: - was purchased and then auctioned. Yeah, and it was a really – from the people that I've talked to, it was very, you know, odd time because Minor was a person who was everywhere-

Ford: Oh yeah. Right.

Miner: -and involved in everything and –

Ford: Right.

Miner: -it just suddenly – [snaps finger]

Ford: Right. Yeah.Yeah.

Miner: -disappeared.

Ford: Mm-hmm. Mm-hmm.

Miner: Umm so, one of the things that I am asking people to reflect on is this idea of Minor's legacy, so the building obviously –

Ford: Ah-huh.

Miner: -is a – is a great legacy.

Ford: Yeah. Yeah.

Miner: And he did a lot of other construction projects –

Ford: Mm-hmm. Mm-hmm.

Miner: -on campus as well.

Ford: Uh-huh.

Miner: One thing that people seem to think is that the university should have honored his desire to build a collection by keeping his entire collection, and it had nearly twelve thousand items in it –

Ford: Mm-hmm.

Miner: -when I cataloged it-

Ford: Mm-hmm. Mm-hmm.

Miner: -and I was wondering if you could – if you would have-have any opinions or perspectives to share on –

Ford: Well, not –

Miner: -that, so.

Ford: -knowing what was in the collection. I – given the mission of the university, I think that would've been a very large collection to keep if it wasn't useful for undergraduates. Now, you know, if you were at a larger institution where we keep collections of faculty, it would be different, but... I- you know, I don't know.

Miner: Yeah.

Ford: I-I mean I can't im- well, I mean there will be people like you who might have liked to studied, but you've got the list.

Miner: Yeah. Right.

Ford: So, I mean at least you know what was in the collection.

Miner: Exactly.

Ford: And just from scanning it there, it doesn't look like the kind of thing undergraduates would particularly want-

Miner: Right.

Ford: -and I assume that your special collections are pretty much focused on the history of the university and things that students would - might use.

Miner: Ah-huh. Yeah. It's very- the collection development, for special collections –

Ford: Right.

Miner: -is very much focused on the curriculum.

Ford: Yeah. That's why I've said –

Miner: And-and also, you know, the ability to inspire research –

Ford: Right. Exactly.

Miner: -into other areas.

Ford: Exactly.

Miner: And we did keep –

Ford: Mm-hmm.

Miner: -about ten percent –

Ford: Mm-hmm. Mm-hmm.

Miner: -of what he had, and we kept in areas that were already part of –

Ford: Uh-huh.

Miner: -special collections. We had a couple –

Ford: And you probably –

Miner: -I think so.

Ford: -know that some place that it was from his collection.

Miner: Yeah.

Ford: So, if somebody wanted to study that, they could.

Miner: Right.

Ford: Uh-huh.

Miner: Yeah.

Ford: Uh-huh.

Miner: Good.

Ford: Yeah. Yeah.

Miner: Okay. I am – I am asking all the librarians in particular –

Ford: Uh-huh.

Miner: -that question –

Ford: Okay.

Miner: -because uh there- there are differences of opinion, and I think it's- it's an interesting-

Ford: Ah-huh. Yeah.

Miner: -part of the-

Ford: Yeah.

Miner: -the professional.

Ford: I think the way that, again the world is changing; to keep a collection intact –

Miner: Yeah.

Ford: -it has to be pretty darn special today. I mean, I think even at the University of Illinois we don't make this kind of promises anymore.

Miner: Yeah.

Ford: I mean, there was a time when you did, but now no. I mean, we don't even promise to keep it.

Miner: Yeah. [laughs]

Ford: [laughs] You know, I mean we'll take the collection, and we'll either keep it or sell it or-or whatever. I-I just think, again, the changing nature of libraries...

Miner: Ah-huh.

Ford: In-In less and - well, Minor was clearly very important at Illinois Wesleyan University; how important his collecting habits were –

Miner: Yeah.

Ford: -in the larger world. I mean, who knows?

Miner: Yeah.

Ford: I don't.

Miner: Hmm.

Ford: But-

Miner: So, and that's - and that's brings up the-the other part of this is the-the influence that a person like that could have on a place like Illinois Wesleyan.

Ford: Uh-huh. Uh-huh. Uh-huh.

Miner: And it didn't sound like you maybe had any direct umm knowledge of that, but o-of his ex-

Ford: What-

Miner: Go ahead.

Ford: What I know about his influence –

Miner: Ah-huh.

Ford: -is that he thought libraries were important-

Miner: Okay.

Ford: -and was a key person in getting that new library built.

Miner: Perfect.

Ford: I mean, that's what I know about him.

Miner: Sure.

Ford: And I-I certainly think the in- that whatever else he did, that has had a major impact on the institution and the students that study there.

Miner: Right.

Ford: And so, you know, if he did nothing else...

Miner: That's pretty good.

Ford: I-I would say that's- that's a pretty big deal for a place that had not really had what I would call "a respectable library" for a long time.

Miner: Right. Ah-huh.

Ford: So-

Miner: Well, that sounds like a wrapping up point.

Ford: Oh really? Wow, okay! [laughs]

Miner: [laughs] Did you have any other things that –

Ford: I, you know, I –

Miner: -you'd like to share about him? Those are-

Ford: I don't – I don't really – I am sorry –

Miner: No, that's fine!

Ford: I don't have much to say. You-You know, I didn't know him well.

Miner: Right.

Ford: And I, you know, my – while I go back to the university, my impact just fairly superfi- I – not my impact, my interaction is fairly superficial.

Miner: Mm-hmm.

Ford: And, you know, I don't know –

Miner: Yeah. Well –

Ford: - all about it.

Miner: That's great, though.

Ford: Yeah.

Miner: I appreciate it.

Ford: You are welcome. Well, great.

Miner: And it's a beautiful day.

Ford: Thank you.

Miner: Thank you.

Ford: It is a beautiful day, isn't it?