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## Cindy Gendrich

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Oral History Interview with Cindy Gendrich,  
Conducted over Skype, January 23rd, 2016  
Conducted by Meg Miner, Illinois Wesleyan Archivist

Meg Miner: My name is Meg Miner, and I'm Illinois Wesleyan's archivist and special collections librarian, and today is January 23rd, and I am on a telephone interview with Cindy- you prefer Cindy or Cynthia?

Cindy Gendrich: Cindy.

Miner: Cindy Gendrich, and go ahead and tell us about yourself, where you're at now and how you came to be affiliated with Wesleyan and Minor Myers please.

Gendrich: Sure. My name's Cindy Gendrich, so it's definitely a hard sound at the end of the name.

Miner: Sorry.

Gendrich: I'm a professor at Lake Forest University and I'm also the director of- of...a center called the Interdisciplinary Performance and the Liberal Arts Center. I went to Illinois Wesleyan from 1980 to 1984 as an undergrad and a theatre major there. And then I returned while I was writing my dissertation in 1996 and I- and I was just supposed to be a sabbatical replacement and I- and I ended up being a visiting professor when one of the professors left and his position needed to get filled for a little while and I think he was an adjunct person or a visiting person himself. So I ended up being at- at Illinois Wesleyan for two and a half years, and I-...shortly after I gone there actually I ended up running into Minor and he introduced himself to me in the pit. And he didn't know my face and- and started asking me questions about what I was writing my dissertation on and it turned out that we had these sort of crazy interests in 19th century etiquette, and I mean, cooking in common, and we just sort of became friends. And he was so interested in my dissertation topic that he started loaning me books and in particular a bunch of 19th century etiquette books that I actually found very useful for what I was writing about. I was writing about 19th century American comic actresses and the (unsure, 2:11-2:13??) and I was really interested in sort of the social prohibitions on various sorts of things and these women who were performing as comedians were- or comediennes, as in comic actresses, were just violating just by doing things that they were doing. So anyway, I ended up having a lot of great conversations about theatre and about etiquette and we both loved food, so we ended up talking about cooking and making food a lot, and anyway, just- that's how- that's how I came to know him.

Miner: Well, that's really interesting that one of the comments I had from- I think it might have even been a person who was a local book dealer at the time that we did the auction was they- they did not know about his interest in etiquette books. Did you know- did he tell you why he was interested in that sort of thing?

Gendrich: I mean, I think that it was part of the sort of- he liked understanding the big picture, as I did and knowing what the- what the sort of cultural fabric was of a time period, and you know, eating and food, and his interest in that I think ended up tying together with that. But one of the things we talked about was that etiquette books give you into- a window into what people are doing that- that society thinks needs correcting. [Miner laughs] And so, you know, if you have a bunch of etiquette books that are telling you, you know, "Don't sit on the floor in people's houses" then apparently this is a problem, you know. You'd think people wouldn't do stuff like that but apparently they would. [Miner laughs] So- and- and- the progression of that- he gave me recommendations on a number of other books you know, give you the- the progression of- of change in- in- in etiquette and people's behavior. Part of it was a class issue and he was interested in that so that one of the things you would do and I think he was the person who actually told me this, but you know, by the time you get to the Victorian era, if you're in- especially if you're in England, but also here in the United States late in the era, you would run into these collections of people's silverware for the dinner table.

Miner: Hmm.

Gendrich: And you would have like fifteen pieces of silverware every place setting. And one of the things that- that we talked about was how much that was a way of keeping people, you know, keeping the riff-raff out. Like that was a way of people who had money keeping people from moving up-

Miner: Hmm.

Gendrich: -that, you know, you didn't let somebody into your house you didn't know that- that special fork or that special tool that you used to get the escargot out of the, you know, out of their shell.

Miner: Hmm.

Gendrich: That there were just that- that there were ways of enforcing, you know, keeping- keeping the social circle narrow by continually specializing in your- in your etiquette and one of those ways that it manifested was in- was in the silverware, but there were lots of other ways that also happened.

Miner: Hmm.

Gendrich: But he was very fond of looking backwards like to the 1700s and looking at the kinds of etiquette books that were- the kinds of etiquette rules that were being put out then as well. But this is a little bit of a crude side but like at that point- so if we go from the escargot tool all the way back to like 1760 where you have somebody saying the best way- this is really terrible, but the best way to...if you have to fart at the dinner table the best thing to do is to cough into your napkin...[both laugh]...at the same time. So, you know, from this kind of ridiculous, like terrible behavior all the way up to through the century to this much less crude manifestation of it. But eventually that's the if you're having to tell people to do this clearly is happening and somebody needs to try to correct it. [laughs]

Miner: Good thing- good thing to have practical, you know- [laughs]

Gendrich: [laughs] So yeah, he always interested in those kind of funny things as well. Like he always liked to laugh so he turned around and laughed about these (unsure, 6:50??) talk and laugh about them together.

Miner: Mm-hmm. That's great.

Gendrich: I mean, people's behavior is so absurd. So I think that's part of- that's part of the interest to, is this sort of- why do people act this way, you know? He was just fascinated with people and their behavior. So etiquette was a great way of getting a handle on- on human behavior I think as much as anything else.

Miner: That's wonderful. Are you a collector? Do you collect things?

Gendrich: I don't really collect things. I'm not a super nostalgic person.

Miner: Hmm.

Gendrich: So, I mean- but I have a lot of books. I mean, I'm- I'm a professor so I suppose I'm a- I'm a book collector in a way. But I don't collect older- a lot of older books. I have a couple of- I have a couple of older books but I think that's the- you know, I don't- I don't collect first editions or anything like that, although I really wish I'd known about the sale of Minor's- the books, because I would have- I think I would have bought some of the them-

Miner: Hmm.

Gendrich: Especially the- he look at some of his really old cookery books and this- he had a first edition of (name of book, 8:02??) I think- cookbooks I would- that I would have paid a pretty penny to have but-

Miner: Hmm.

Gendrich: -but I don't have- I probably would have done that more out of fondness for him than I would have out of the desire to collect things-

Miner: So-

Gendrich: -'cause I don't like clutter particularly and I have more clutter than I would like so I actually try to purge every once in a while. I have a lot of cookbooks as well because I like to cook, but I recently went from about three hundred cookbooks down to about eighty so-

Miner: Oh!

Gendrich: -I got rid of a whole bunch of them I wasn't using.

Miner: That's quite neat actually.

Gendrich: (unsure, 8:37??) Yeah. [laughs]

Miner: Did you know- do you know of his antique- I think somebody described it to me as an antique silverware collection?

Gendrich: I think he mentioned it to me once during one of those conversations about the silverware.

Miner: Okay.

Gendrich: But I don't think I ever saw it.

Miner: Yeah. I wasn't aware of that until I started this project so- so it's interesting some of- some of the things that are emerging. He described himself as a collector of the 18th century, but there was so much more.

Gendrich: Well, I know he was fascinated with the 19th century too because he- he just kind of wondered how we got from that period that he was so enamored with to- to where we are- you

know, where we were in the 19-1990s when I- when I knew him. 'Cause so, you know, he didn't necessarily think of it as all being an improvement. So-

Miner: So he- so he expressed more wonder in how humanity got it from there or how he he'd personally gotten his collections?

Gendrich: How humanity had gotten there.

Miner: Oh, okay.

Gendrich: I think he was really interested in the-in the just the (unsure, 9:50??) of history and you know, what- what forces worked on us to make us, you know, make up rules and decisions and provinces and tastes that- you know, that we came to have and why different cultures have those rules and differences and tastes-

Miner: Sure.

Gendrich: -as well. So he got to know- he had a big party for- who was it...no, who- who was it? He was one of the Merchant and Ivory guys. And I can't remember if it was Merchant or Ivory. [Miner laughs] But, you know, it was the Indian gentleman, it was- we had Indian food over at Minor's house and myself at the time was very interested in- in- in learning how to cook Indian food and learning how to cook Indian and so anyway Minor was really interested in how, you know, food was a part of that and was- just was a big- was a big foodie so-

Miner: Hmm.

Gendrich: -so the opportunity just sort of experience those preferences and taste and cultural kind of norms I think was an- an exciting moment for him and, you know, as you know, he was really, really interested in multi-talented people too, and so he- he just loved to see how the combinations of things came together as well and it's something that I share as well and it's one of the reasons that I'm- we had in common and it's one of the reasons the- the center that I direct now, which is really all about how to put these interesting combinations together and then how does- what new things come from seeing these new combinations and so we were talking about that sometimes as well.

Miner: Yeah. Well, that's a way...that title, the way you shared that title of where you're working, that sort of blew me away. I thought "Well, that's like it, right?" [laughs] That's-

Gendrich: Yeah.

Miner: -that's- that's really it in a nutshell, isn't it? Wow.

Gendrich: Yeah. Well, it is. Again, it's what, you know, I think because at that place, there's quite a (unsure, 12:00??) in the liberal arts center is really about how we- how we use the performing arts to give us a place and a reason to talk about things that we care about and those things, you know, plays are about things. Music was from a- from a time and place and expresses human feeling and being in a particular way. And dance of course in many of the same ways. How do these- how do these pieces all fit together? And you know, I think that's true of history as well, that- I was trained as a theater historian so seeing all those cultural connections has to me always been something that I find really fascinating. And I think it's- I mean, I just think Miner and I were kind of kindred spirits that way.

Miner: Well, it sure sounds like it. [both laugh] Let's talk a little bit about- you said you had conversations with him about, you know, quite a range of things but did you he tell you any about how he, you know, started collecting or how he acquired things? Were you part of that?

Gendrich: Not really. I think- I mean, he was always sharing that he had gotten something or he was looking into getting something but I didn't really know how he went about doing it and obviously the way that you get stuff now is so different from how he- he got things.

Miner: Hmm.

Gendrich: And that was before the internet was widely used for that kind of stuff. I mean, even Ebay had started and I think he was doing some stuff with Ebay. But no, I have no idea how he got started. I'd be really fascinated to know that myself.

Miner: Well, I found some of those Ebay printouts. [both laugh] People have told me a couple of different, really interesting stories about Ebay too, so that's- that was definitely I think something he was interested in.

Gendrich: Yeah.

Miner: So-

Gendrich: Well, it's such a great- if you are a collector it's like Mecca! You know? [laughs]

Miner: I think that would be the good days and bad days, right? [laughs]

Gendrich: Exactly. Exactly.

Miner: But he loaned things to you then. And- and did he express any kind of- you said he was not the kind of, in the note that you sent, I really appreciated, you know, that observation that he wasn't the kind of who would just keep things to himself. So when he loaned things to you though, did he have any, you know, expressions of like...worry about getting things back or anything like that?

Gendrich: No. No. [laughs] That is actually hilarious. He would bring- I remember him bringing over a bag. I don't remember if it was in a plastic bag or a paper bag, but it was like a grocery bag. You know, a bag of these etiquette books for me. Some of them were not- they were old so, you know, I could have been rough with them, so- but he never even said "Be careful with these!" You know, he just said, "Here. I hope they're useful to you." And he would tell me a little bit about them and I could tell from the way he was handling them and I've handled- I've been to a lot of collections so I- I knew I should be careful with them. And I suppose he saw when he handed them to me I- I was tender with them and I wasn't going to dog your pages or you know, whatever. I wasn't going to treat them badly. But he noticed distinctly. I distinctly remember thinking that he was being awfully casual about- about the books. [Miner laughs] I don't think the books that he was loaning to me were particularly expensive or you know, super valuable elements of his collection, but, you know, he was very- he was pretty cavalier about them and just said, you know, "Give them back when you're done!"

Miner: That's great.

Gendrich: And I brought them back over to him in the same plastic or paper bag or whatever bag that was. I remember just keeping the bag and keeping them in the bag and taking them back over to him when I was done with them and he was grateful to have them back and asked if I wanted anything else. When we went over to visit his house at that party for the- for the Merchant Ivory guy, I- he showed me a couple- he showed me where he kept his books. Like and I remember seeing that they were- they were double-shelved and he, you know, had two layers because he had so many of them that he had some in the-

Miner: Was that the basement?

Gendrich: -back layer. Pardon me?

Miner: Was that the basement?

Gendrich: No, this was in his- in his- in his main space upstairs.

Miner: Main space, okay. Go ahead. So the back layer-



Gendrich: He said, you know, he said, “There’s some in this back layer back here.” I remember him getting them and pulling stuff out and you know, pulling things out for me to look at.

Miner: Hmm.

Gendrich: But- but my interest was fairly narrow, so that wasn’t borrowing a ton of books. I think he prob he loaned- I’d have to check my dissertation just to be sure, but I think he only loaned me about ten-

Miner: Huh.

Gendrich: -over- over that time.

Miner: That’s great. So how did his- did it strike you as being organized, his collection?

Gendrich: Yeah, yeah. I mean, he knew where everything was.

Miner: Mm-hmm.

Gendrich: Whatever- the stuff upstairs anyway. I never went down to the basement but he’s got lots more. [laughs]

Miner: I’ve- I’ve been told his basement shelves were 3-D-

Gendrich: Wow.

Miner: -so it’s interesting to hear that upstairs was 2-D. I have not heard that yet. I’m- I’m hoping someday somebody will tell me they had a picture of this ‘cause nobody ever got a picture of it as far as I know.

Gendrich: Oh, see- I have a- I have a really clear- I guess a clear picture in my head, of the one shelf- it was like an o- it was a high shelf.

Miner: Yeah.

Gendrich: Like it was wrapped around the window or what it was.

Miner: Hmm.

Gendrich: Yeah.

Miner: You- you've talked about how he influenced you personally and I was wondering if you have any observations on how his kind of personality influenced Illinois Wesleyan or even other people that you-

Gendrich: Yeah. I think- I mean, he was so gregarious and present and interested. And, you know, I was only there two and a half years, so I can't- I can't speak to any, you know, kind-kind of long-term thing. But I have such a strong memory of- of- of his friendliness and- and his warmth. I think, you know, people who- I remember there being one person in- in the theatre department who was not as- I don't know how to quite put this, but she- she was worried that he was scattered-

Miner: Hmm.

Gendrich: - you know, that he- he was too interested in too many things. He just needed...[laughs]...he just needed to stay focused on raising money for the university and stuff like that. And I remember going, "No, you're completely wrong." Like I was so annoyed by that...[Miner laughs]...kind of observation and I know that, you know, since then, you know, I've- I've worked under a couple of different presidents at- at Lake Forest and a couple of different provosts, and I remember I was the on the search for our current provost and I remember thinking during the...interview process that- 'cause- 'cause the provost that we have now described himself as- he was a dean at NYU and he described himself as a "walking around dean"-

Miner: Huh.

Gendrich: -and he liked to go places and see people and check in with them and I thought, "He's like Minor!" You know, like Minor was a walking around person. He was visible. He wasn't up in his office all the time. And I think that's unusual now and I have often said if I could just have, you know, a Minor clone that way, what a great thing that would be because he was just so visible and connected and- and I think that's such a- that's a powerful thing and I wish more presidents were like that instead of just being fundraisers.

Miner: Interesting.

Gendrich: 'Cause that's- 'cause now, I mean, I don't know. I know that the "meet the president" has been very popular at- at Wesleyan as well, and I don't know- I don't know him. But I have to think that he had to have been a pretty friendly guy too. I can't imagine they would have hired someone after Minor who was kind of a, you know, stoic, stay in your office kind of guy.

Miner: Yeah. He was very popular with the students, always present like you said-

Gendrich: Yeah. Yeah.

Miner: -but also a really good fundraiser. [laughs]

Gendrich: Yeah. Yeah. [laughs]

Miner: I mean, that's what he did.

Gendrich: Yeah, we need both, right?

Miner: Yeah. Yeah, I guess that's the perfect combination, right? [laughs]

Gendrich: Yeah. Yeah.

Miner: Yeah, and our new president seems very- very friendly and open as well, I think.

Gendrich: Yeah.

Miner: Yeah, I think that's a trend, you know, you can see with these three that's a trend.  
[laughs]

Gendrich: Yeah. And that- and that- that may be Minor because I don't remember a- I don't- I don't even remember the name of the president when I was at school there. But I remember thinking he was quite distant and you know, we kind of just didn't really know him and he just seemed kind of stiff.

Miner: Hmm. Hmm.

Gendrich: So-

Miner: Yeah.

Gendrich: -yeah. Maybe that's the trend, you know. Maybe it's that feeling of being in a community together with people and caring about their intellectual development and caring about them as human beings and as full people and all that stuff. That might be- you know, that- that could very well be a Minor influence.

Miner: That's interesting. Did he ever share his- his philosophy of libraries with you- how- how he saw libraries?

Gendrich: No, no.

Miner: So you said you weren't aware that the university auctioned his collection.

Gendrich: Yeah.

Miner: But would you care to speculate on what you think he might have thought of that?

Gendrich: I don't know. I mean, I- I suppose he might have liked for it to all live in one place but I think he would have- he might have been torn because I think he really did like for people to really, you know, to use the books and to- if you- if you wanted to learning something, then, you know, having- and he has books that you- obviously he treated that need was that I- I needed something and- and he had it and so here.

Miner: Yeah.

Gendrich: But so- so I don't know. But I think he might have been- he might have been torn 'cause he put some things together I think that, you know, he really would have liked for them to be together. But, yeah. So I don't know. I- I hesitate to completely speculate but I bet he would have had mixed feelings about it.

Miner: That's okay. That's, you know, I'm just asking, trying to get a good picture of it. So is there anything else you think we should know about him to- to better understand him or-

Gendrich: I mean, I- I didn't know him for that long. I'm sure people who knew him longer will be able to fill you in. And I probably shared as- as much as I have. But- but I really- I just thought he was great.

Miner: Yeah. I really appreciate you sharing your stories.

Gendrich: It was really nice talking to you Meg!

Miner: Cindy, it was great talking with you too and good luck out there, sounds like great things going on.

Gendrich: Okay. 'Kay, bye.

Miner: Take care.