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Ann Harding

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Oral History Interview with Ann Harding
in Holmes Hall, January 22nd, 2016
Conducted by Meg Miner, Illinois Wesleyan Archivist

Meg Miner: My name is Meg Miner, and today is January 22nd, 2016, and I'm in Holmes Student Center with Ann Harding to talk about Minor Myers, president of our university. So Ann, good morning. Why don't you tell us your name and your association with Minor.

Ann Harding: Okay, I'm Ann Harding, I'm a retiree. I retired in June of 2014. I...was here for twenty-six years. Eighteen of those years I was the assistant director of the career center, the Hart Career Center. I was hired to centralize an internship program. Prior to that the internships had been within each of the departments and the university wanted to bring them into one- one location. I was hired by Betty Rademacher who was the director of the career center at the time. After eighteen years, I moved over to the alumni relations office where I retired as the director of alum- alumni relations.

Miner: And you were in that office for-

Harding: Eight years.

Miner: Eight years.

Harding: I was hired by Marty Smith. I think Marty had only been in his position for maybe less than a year when I was hired.

Miner: Okay. So what kind of interactions did you have with Minor?

Harding: So with Minor...interesting stories. I'll- they're all interesting. [Miner laughs] You know, Minor- first I'll say from personal standpoint, my middle son Luke, who's actually Wesleyan class of '03, was a good friend with Jeff Myers-

Miner: Oh!

Harding: -Minor's son. And the first time Jeff invited Luke to come and spend the night at the president's house, I was like, "Oh my God. Okay Luke, listen, this is the president of the university, make sure you're on your best behavior," you know, "Eat everything on your plate, make your bed, blah, blah, blah." Okay, so he goes off, and the next morning I come to pick him up and I said, "Okay, you know, tell me everything. How was it?" And the one thing that I remember because my husband, Luke's dad, worked at State Farm in the days you wore a suit and everyone was to the nines when they went to work. He said, "Mom, I don't think Jeff's dad took a shower before he went to work today." [Miner laughs] and I say, "Luke, why would you say that?" and he goes, "Well, I saw him leave for work and his hair was all messed up!" [Miner laughs] I said, "Well that's how he wears it." That's how he wears his hair...[laughs].

Miner: [laughs] That's great, and how old was Luke at the time?

Harding: Probably fourth grade.

Miner: Oh my gosh. Wow.

Harding: Fourth or fifth grade. And he spent many nights over there and had lots of stories of...especially Ellen. But the Minor stories and as it relates to the books, the basement was full of bookshelves.

Miner: I've heard that. I've never seen any pictures.

Harding: Really? Row after row after row of bookshelves. So it was kind of a fun place for the boys for hide and seek. But Jeff also had a pet and I think it was a snake, not sure. Any way, it got loose in the books.

Miner: Oh my gosh!

Harding: And they couldn't find it. [Miner laughs] And they said "Oh well, what the heck!" and they went out and played basketball.

Miner: [overlapping] And they just left it?

Harding: [overlapping] They just left it.

Miner: Did it ever turn up?

Harding: No, I just- I just don't think about the president's house with a snake loose in the basement but anyway, amongst all the books. A book story that I was told- we have a wonderful group of alumni in the Phoenix area. And...every year we have an alumni event there. And the night before the actual event, two of our alums, Greg and Co Gardner, would host a small dinner party there. Maybe...it wasn't small, there were maybe twenty-five, thirty people at their home. But apparently one evening at one of those events, somebody got into a conversation with Minor about the book *Little Black Sambo*.

Miner: Oh.

Harding: And...any ways, shortly after Minor returned from that Alumni Connections, he sent a copy of *Little Black Sambo* to Greg and Co Gardner. I mean, and it was an original.

Miner: Mm-hmm.

Harding: And you know "I thought you'd enjoy a copy of this since our conversation."

Miner: [laughs] So he just happened to have it.

Harding: He just happened to have a copy of *Little Black Sambo*. But I also heard people talking about his cookbook collection and he might have a cookbook written in Chinese...he just had so many different interests. One thing that stands out in my mind where he really made me think- he had stopped me on the quad and by this time I had worked for him for a number of years and he said, “Ann, what is your passion?”

Miner: Hmm.

Harding: And no one had ever asked me that.

Miner: Hmm.

Harding: You know, people have asked me what do you like to do, who do you love, what are your loves, but no one had ever asked me what is your passion. And I- I wonder is my passion the same thing as what I love to do-

Miner: Interesting.

Harding: -is it who I love? What does that mean? And I mean he just stopped me dead in my tracks ‘cause I didn’t know the answer to that question. What is your passion?

Miner: So he left you speechless.

Harding: He did.

Miner: Hmm.

Harding: Another story of- of Minor, I- I belonged to a rotary club in Bloomington and I had him come and speak.

Miner: Oh fun!

Harding: We meet at 7:45 AM so it’s a breakfast club. And...so I was sitting with Minor and you know we’re at a table of about eight people just talking and he was about to go up to be the program for this group of you know business people. And he said, “ So Ann, tell me what you want me to talk about today.” [Miner laughs] I said “Minor, you’re on in two minutes, don’t you know what you’re gonna talk about?” “Well, I could talk about so many things.” And he took a napkin and started, you know, scribbling a few things and next thing you know, he’s up, speaking from the podium for a good fifteen minutes. He had listened to the conversations amongst other people at the table-

Miner: Hmm.

Harding: -kind of knew what their interests were, and just got up there and- and had the room spellbound by his delivery. And then I found out a couple of week later that the person that was sitting on the other side of Minor at that table, they got to talking about music and about jazz.

Miner: Hmm.

Harding: And he told me “Ann, I got a note- a handwritten note from Minor with a CD from our jazz ensemble here”-

Miner: Hmm.

Harding: -saying “I’d thought you’d like this.”

Miner: Hmm.

Harding: So really he listened and he knew who his audience was and he could connect with so many people on so many levels.

Miner: That’s interesting. Wow...I’ve heard those handwritten note stories before and...we are fortunate that he kept copies-

Harding: Mmm.

Miner: -of a lot of that kind of thing so we have a lot of the correspondence that was written to him or written back afterwards and that kind of thing.

Harding: Well, I know when I retired and I sent you a box or two of my memorabilia there were a lot of handwritten notes from Minor. And his handwriting is unlike anything I had ever seen, and I- I mean...[Miner laughs]...and I thought, “Oh gee, do I want to turn this over to the library or do I want to frame it and hang it up in my home office?” ‘cause I just loved his handwriting. And you know the idea of...a president of a university taking the time to write me a handwritten note. And some of those dated back to when I was the assistant director of the career center just coordinating the internship program, was very far down the totem pole. And...so I mean it just made you realize what a special place you worked at when the president of the university would take the time to write you a note.

Miner: Sure. That’s a great story.

Harding: Yeah. Now Minor...you know, when I worked for the career center we were in the basement of Gulick Hall. So we were off the beaten path for the president.

Miner: Hmm.

Harding: But there were times when the president would just show up down there. One year...let’s see...I think it was my...either my fortieth or my fiftieth birthday...[Miner laughs]...can’t remember, it was probably my fiftieth, yeah it was my fiftieth. Warren Kissner who was the director of the career center at the time had a surprise birthday party for me. And he had signs all over the campus which I didn’t know. Cause I had come in in the morning and gone down to the basement of Gulick hall...[Miner laughs]...and that’s where I was. And Minor

Myers came over for my birthday which I thought was just- he was like “Yeah I saw the sign!” and I’m like “What sign?” “There’s signs all over campus that it’s your birthday!”

Miner: Oh my gosh.

Harding: So he came down and I just- I just- but I had felt that way about Wesleyan that from the top down it’s family.

Miner: That’s great.

Harding: Yeah.

Miner: So the idea that he...shared a book with somebody, I mean it’s sort of one of the questions I had about how he acquired things and then what he did with them. And maybe you don’t have a specific story related to this, but the idea of sending something someone just because of their interests is an interesting thing. Do you have any other sense of- cause I mean I’ve read things where he was interviewed and talked about what his collecting interests was, but he had so many more.

Harding: Yeah.

Miner: Right? I mean it wasn’t very narrowly defined or as narrowly defined as he articulated. One of the things I’m interested in, you know, is how all these things get amassed, what did he do with them, [overlapping] so nothing specific on that.

Harding: [overlapping] In- in- in what collection does *Little Black Sambo* fall?

Miner: I have-

Harding: I have no idea what- I just- I just know from early on his passion was to build a new library-

Miner: Mm-hmm.

Harding: -for Illinois Wesleyan. That was always a topic. We all knew of his variety of interests. I didn’t know about the basement with all the books until my son spent the night there.

Miner: Mm-hmm.

Harding: And Minor never gave me a book or asked me what I like to read-

Miner: Mm-hmm. Sure.

Harding: -or you know, it’s the passion thing is what- and I suppose...if I would’ve had a passion I would’ve had books-

Miner: Hmm.

Harding: -that- that supported that passion. And Minor had so many passions-

Miner: And that's it.

Harding: Again, he- he could speak off the cuff on so many things.

Miner: Mm-hmm.

Harding: I remember when- when Wesleyan was toying with the idea of changing January short term to May term.

Miner: Yes.

Harding: And I was really against it.

Miner: Why?

Harding: Because my internship program was solid in January.

Miner: Oh!

Harding: And I didn't think I could do it in May because the summer program was also solid. But there was some talk of having it, there was some talk...of during spring break, having the students take a class rather than spring break and I thought that is crazy...[Miner laughs]...and Minor said "Well, spring break was never really important to me when I was in college." And I thought "I'm sure it wasn't Minor." [Miner laughs] I'm sure you didn't go to the beach. [Miner laughs] "You didn't go to the islands." But you know, in some ways I don't know how in touch he was with our students, but in other ways I've heard stories where Minor would...would become very close with students, you know, specific students and say "Come for dinner and bring friends."

Miner: Hmm.

Harding: That was his way of staying in touch with the smaller groups. Of course I'm sure he was very close with the student senate...exec board, got to know them quite well. But-

Miner: Oh yeah.

Harding: -but I- one thing he said, I spoke one time to...I don't know what it's called but when the students and their parents come and they've been admitted but they've not sent their check, their commitment.

Miner: Mm-hmm.

Harding: And I was going to speak and Minor said, "Okay Ann, when you speak-" I was there at the-the career center at the time and I was going to be talking about where our students go to work and where they go to graduate school. And he told me he didn't want me to mention any school that had a direction in it. You know, like Southern Illinois...[Miner laughs]...or- he- he- wanted the top of the top graduate school programs that our students were going to.

Miner: That's interesting.

Harding: Well, yes, we did have some, not the majority. And some of the directional colleges have very good graduate programs. [Miner laughs]...but he didn't want those mentioned. He also said once when talking about jobs, "The jobs just come to our students."

Miner: Hmm.

Harding: And I thought "No, they don't. We work very hard for the employers to come to them."

Miner: Hmm.

Harding: So in some ways I think he was a bit out of touch with the realities that our students were going to face once they got out of here.

Miner: Sure.

Harding: Unless they were going to go to graduate school and they were the top of the top, the cream of the cream. And I- like I said we did- we did have those students going to those places but not the majority. The majority of our students were going to work, right?

Miner: Right.

Harding: And so we had to try to educate Minor about what the career services really were and when I was hired, I was just three-quarter time and I only worked when students were here so I was off in the summer. So a few years after Minor was here we did finally take a look at the graduate survey and the career center and my job then became full time-

Miner: Hmm.

Harding: -which was a godsend because the work was definitely there even if the students weren't there. There was a lot of work you had to do so that the employers would be there for our students in the fall. So he came along but...you know, that was a point of interest for him for a bit but then he moved on and had a different point of interest.

Miner: Hmm.

Harding: But always the library was the primary point of interest for him.

Miner: Well, it's nice that he could be educated himself, yeah.

Harding: Right, and if you're going to speak about the university, you have to know all parts of the university. And because we were really out a lot in the community with our interns and he was being asked to speak at these different community organizations, you need to be able to talk about that. And the Wesleyan Associates program was pretty strong at the time too, and so we, you know, once a year we had the leading business people in McLean county here. Many of those people had our interns working for them so I mean I think that's what sparked the interest.

Miner: Sure. Yeah. Do you have any perspective on the way the university distributed his collection? Or actually I should say the way the library distributed his collection after his death? Do you have any sense- one of the things I'm curious about was how he would feel about that. It doesn't sound like you had a lot of in depth conversations about collecting with him but [overlapping] I don't know, I'm just sort of curious.

Harding: [overlapping] I- I didn't. I don't have a lot of interest or a lot of knowledge. I guess I thought that's how you were brought to campus was to kind of-

Miner: Well, I was actually hired before then. Yeah, I was hired to manage a collection that he donated to the library before he died. So- and a couple of other things they cobbled together so a position out of different needs and different money.

Harding: Well, did we sell them? Didn't we sell them?

Miner: In the auction- the auction was something that was determined after the university decided to purchase the collections so yeah. [overlapping] And that's part of what I'm doing with this-

Harding: [overlapping] The university bought them in its entirety? Collection, and then the university decided to sell some-

Miner: Well... it's some things that I'm teasing out right? So I think it was a library decision to auction most of them-

Harding: Ah.

Miner: -after I did an analysis of what was there and we looked at what we had the capacity.

Harding: How many books were there?

Miner: Twelve thousand.

Harding: Twelve thousand. And where were they-

Miner: We kept some. We kept things that were part of the collecting focus of special collections and archives already.

Harding: But Meg, where do you keep twelve thousand books?

Miner: Well see, that became the problem. In his home, they were in 3D bundle shelves is what I'm told but in the basement someone told me they were bookcases that he hammered and put in upstairs in the room. I never saw any of that. I never saw any of that because- because I was a temporary employee at the time so none of this was sort of my decision making, but I was very active in organizing the collection and they put them all in (name of library, 17:28??).

Harding: Now did they-

Miner: Now I can remember that.

Harding: Now, did they have twelve thousand books catalogued? Did they know where were? They were just on a shelf?

Miner: They were in- from what I understand they were not in an order but of course I would never want anybody coming in my home and saying I- I know exactly where everything is...[Harding laughs]...I tend to give people slack on, you know, their own organizing principles because you know Minor was able to come back after that event and go find *Little Black Sambo*.

Harding: He found it! Who knows, he probably had Susan Bassey and Carl Teichman over there digging through, who knows.

Miner: So yeah, so one of the questions I'm looking at is really what- what did he have in his collections 'cause all I ever saw was the books and I know that there were other things and I've been told that there were more books so I'm com- I'm sort of comparing records that he left of what he purchased-

Harding: Mm-hmm.

Miner: -with what I know I saw because I actually created a- a database of what I saw. We didn't know right away that we would be getting rid of them so it wasn't until really the quantity and the range of subjects became clear as I did the work that I did so-

Harding: One time I remember Minor- this is off-topic but like I said Jeff and my son Luke were...buddies in grade school and so they went to school at (name of school, 18:52??) and they were on the (name of school, 18:54??) basketball team. You know, probably fifth grade. And Minor would come and he would sit in the front row and he always had paper in his breast pocket in his white shirt 'cause he always wore a white shirt.

Miner: Hmm.

Harding: And he would take this paper out and he'd be scribbling notes during the game. And I thought what in the world are you writing during this fifth grade basketball, you know, I don't think you're putting plays together...[both laugh]...on your paper. But I think the man's brain was just in constant motion.

Miner: That's interesting.

Harding: And who knows, maybe he was making notes for the speech he had to give right after the game, who knows. But it was always funny to see Minor come into the games and usually in a seersucker suit...which the pants were too short but he would be here anyway and taking notes...[Miner laughs]. Anyways, and Jeff his son was kind of short so- but he was a good little hustler, so he was, you know, he was there for the game and that's what I give him credit for.

Miner: That's great. That's wonderful.

Harding: Another thing Minor said to me that I always thought was kind of strange. We were hiring the new director of the career center- I think that was the position. And he said, "I want somebody who looks like you, Ann." And we hired Warren so I don't know what that says...[both laugh]...but I thought-

Miner: That's great.

Harding: No Warren-or no Minor, we're not hiring anybody on their looks.

Miner: Right.

Harding: We need to have somebody with a Masters degree in counseling!

Miner: Oh that's funny.

Harding: And some experience.

Miner: And with Warren that thought went.

Harding: I don't know, I don't know. He was a funny guy. But I can still hear his voice in my head. He was- you know, he not only- he made us proud to work here.

Miner: Hmm.

Harding: The first time we were ranked number one- I can still remember the big banner we had across (library name, 21:03??) Library and we had a campus wide ice cream social to celebrate it.

Miner: Hmm.

Harding: We were so proud to work here.

Miner: Hmm.

Harding: We were going places, never heard of- of...the Harvard of the midwest until I heard it from Minor's lips. And we used that term quite a bit but I haven't heard it in a long while to be honest with you. But I just remember we were very hap- very happy, we were very proud, you know. We said in the community that if you work for Illinois Wesleyan, you know, "Oh, Illinois Wesleyan!"

Miner: Hmm.

Harding: Of course the employees were very happy 'cause we got crazy raises back in those days-

Miner: Sure.

Harding: -and we just came the expect that that's what we were going to get every year. And so those days are over.

Miner: (unsure, 22:02??)

Harding: Those days are over.

Miner: (unsure, 22:05??)

Harding: But I still think that if you spend money that you don't really have you can make everybody happy.

Miner: Right.

Harding: But if you have to spend the money that you really have, then not everybody's so happy.

Miner: Yeah.

Harding: So Minor I think had a wonderful ability to lure people into us. I don't know if he had the wonderful ability to bring money into us-

Miner: Yeah.

Harding: -and- and dir- direct the spending of it very wisely. That became Dick Wilson's job. Which he did a terrific job but he had- he had a lot of hills to climb.

Miner: Yeah.

Harding: So I think that'll be something that the new president can do is bring that pride back to the employees and instill that pride and be happy to be here and...but it was- it was an eyes wide open period when- when Minor was here.

Miner: Alright, well thank you so much for sharing your recollections.

Harding: I'm sure this afternoon I'll think, "Oh, there's a story on Minor" but I can't think of anymore other than the ones- I kind of wanted to talk about he was a dad, he was a president, he was a community leader-

Miner: Yeah, yeah, yeah. That's great.

Harding: He- he was a great guy. And he went out very silently. I remember the day I came back from lunch and got the email that he had passed. I just looked at my screen as I'm sure people across campus just kind of stared at their screen. Because we- we knew that he had cancer but he- no one saw him. He didn't really know how bad it was, I don't think.

Miner: Yeah.

Harding: I mean when he couldn't come to graduation we- we knew it had to be bad. We knew that he would be there if he could but it was- it was really sad on campus when he died.

Miner: Big transition.

Harding: Yeah, and you know, then in my role as the director of Alumni Relations, working for Dick Wilson in that role, being all over the country, and really liking Dick but feeling bad for him because everywhere we went those first couple of years it was Minor. Minor, Minor, Minor. And he handled it with grace and he understood that Minor was just this enigma and he was going to have to make his own way here, which he did finally. I mean, when people were talking about Minor he would slip up and say U of I. That's kind of a...[both laugh]...kind of a we're even here. But in the end, Dick was- he was- in my role of director of alumni I'm happy that I worked for Dick and Pat.

Miner: Yeah.

Harding: Because I think out on the road with Dick and Pat together was probably a lot smoother than...Minor and Ellen out on the road.

Miner: So you had those experiences?

Harding: No I didn't- my colleagues had experiences-

Miner: Yeah.

Harding: And I just know that Dick knew what his job was out on the road. He was a good fundraiser, he listened well to people and he didn't talk about himself at all, he just was a very good listener and was able to figure out what these people were interested in and how it might relate back to the university.

Miner: Hmm, hmm.

Harding: And stay connected with them. He didn't use the word passion necessarily but he was listening for the passion-

Miner: Yeah-

Harding: -and if he could relate it back to us here on campus. And over the years with the alumni relations travel- over eight years, seeing those people grow to respect him and love him the same way they had Minor. And it always amazed me, both of them, how they could remember the names.

Miner: Mmm.

Harding: But these people are all over the country and our alumni expect that you will remember their names. They don't realize that they've seen six hundred people since they saw you last, you know, but they did a terrific job too. So if you ever do anything on Dick call us back. [laughs]

Miner: You know, it's funny cause with this project I'm- it's not to say anyone else's story isn't you know important or necessary to document, it's 'cause i've had this personal involvement-

Harding: With the collections, sure.

Miner: And because he never wrote anything about himself, but I'm glad to hear that president Wilson was working on his own two feet.

Harding: Minor never wrote anything about himself?

Miner: Not that I've been able to find.

Harding: Really?

Miner: That's one of my things for the family.

Harding: Well, that'll be interesting that you're going to be able to talk to little Minor- little Minor who's what- 6'5" or whatever it is.

Miner: Right. Yeah, so it should be good. Hopeful. Well I really appreciate you doing this.

Harding: My pleasure.