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Oral History Interview with Greg Koos,
in McLean County Museum of History, 2016

Conducted by Meg Miner, Illinois Wesleyan Archivist

Meg Miner: Good afternoon, this is Meg Miner, I'm the archives at Illinois Wesleyan and I'm working on a sabbatical project about former president Minor Myers Jr. and his collecting interests and some of his influences on campus and in the larger community. Today, I'm in the wonderful McLean County Museum of History with Greg Koos. Greg, please go ahead and introduce yourself however you would like us to...however many titles you would like.

Greg Koos: I'm Greg Koos, executive director of the McLean County Museum of History. I've been doing this work for thirty-eight some years and got to know Minor primarily through my work as the director of the museum.

Miner: And so in like donations or just because of the town- town's affiliations with the University?

Koos: No. We've both enjoyed antiquities. We've both enjoyed the notion of old. both liked old things, liked to look at old things, liked to talk about old things, we liked books, we liked objects. We found commonality in that.

Miner: Okay. And what kind of old things? Like, you would come here and do that or...?

Koos: No, actually I'd say we'd probably did more about seeing in, you know, a flea market or A Gridley Antiques, you'd see that over there, you know, if you'd think of it. Um, the uh, Minor never really got into the object collection here. And his work, he did use the archives, he...and uh, Carl Teichman used the archives in the library for their uh Illustrated History of Illinois Wesleyan the two of them put together. But, uh no, this would have been outside of the museum, okay.

Miner: Okay.

Koos: This would have been uh, about, uh just seeing each other in places where such things were to be found and purchased.

Miner: Okay.

Koos: And so again, the three most common places were uh, flea markets, antique shows, uh antique stores and Babbitt's.

Miner: Did you, uh, ever go to the book sales on our campus?

Koos: Those? Yeah, yeah. I did. And...I thought they were really interesting activities, uh and I know it was a big chunk of Miner trying to get the broader community understanding of- those were educational things, you know. Because they were not just about buying books, they were about getting the variety of books in front of people. And I remember, he and I had a- both buying cookbooks for a period of time.

Miner: Mm-hmm.

Koos: And I was buying cookbooks because I was working on an exhibit on corn and it ended up being an exhibit called corn, Just Corn the Amaizing Story, with -MAIZING. So I was looking for corn cookbooks and cookbooks uh and so he and I would actually kind of “hey I found this, you can get it, I got it”, it was that kind of competition that happens...

Miner: Ah, nice.

Koos: Ya know, lemme show you what I got, you know. So occasionally, you’d see something that he’d overlook, or I’d overlook something that he had seen so you’d run up and show it to that person and say, too bad, you didn’t get it, I did, you know? There’s a uh, kind of um, competitiveness there, you know. But he and I were also competitive in another way, we both considered each other bottom feeders and that is, the idea was to not see how much you could pay but to see how little you could pay. And being able to brag how little you paid for was, was definitely a big counting coup...

Miner: Excellent.

Koos: ...A big coup point to, to say “oh yea I got this for three bucks”, you know.

[Both laugh]

Miner: That’s fantastic.

Koos: So, there, there’s a, I would say Minor would have had a completely different relationship if he was talking to somebody who had deep pockets. And there he might brag about how much he paid, because there’s no question the fact that Minor paid very significant amounts for some of his uh, some of his objects.

Miner: So he shared some of his personal collections then with you?

Koos: Not financially, I just don’t want them looking at if I know I can get it for cheap. Although there is an object, what was it? Carol and I were at one of their Christmas parties, and uh, you know Minor and Ellen furnished the place, you know, and so there’s his really great Japanese vase we were looking at and Carol said, “is it really Japanese?” and I said ‘well, let’s look on the bottom and there could be a signature and that could tell us.’ So we picked it up and there’s a price tag, and the price tag was like, forty-five thousand dollars...

Miner: Oh my God.

Koos: ...And Carol just puts the vase down and, “whoa whoa whoa.” Maybe it was fifteen-thousand, I don’t remember but it was a big number for a vase, you know.

Miner: Yeah, yes.

Koos: And, oh, you know that’s something that he valued, and he, he...he told me that he had debates with his brother, uh ‘cause his brother would get on him about spending so much money on objects and books. And Minor liked to talk to him about, well, if look at the market and there may be more appreciation in value in my stuff is in value and I’d be in stock and maybe I’m the one making the good investment and maybe you’re the one making the dumb investment. And so, it’s uh, he was willing to defend what he was doing as economically sound.

Miner: He was? Okay, you’re the first person who’s told me that. I’m so, uh, interested to hear about that. So, um him purchasing as an investment, um...

Koos: Doesn’t mean that that motivated him, it means that uh, he was a good enough reiteration to be able to make that argument.

Miner: Oh, okay.

[Both laugh]

Koos: And I think there’s some validity to it, I agree with him. You know, its, uh the stuff that he bought is the kind of stuff that would tend to have value. And if you’re a bottom feeder, you’re buying low, then, you know.

Miner: You gotta know where its gonna go.

Koos: You gotta know where it’s gonna go.

Miner: That’s great. So, the kind of things you’re talking about are the, the uh, furnishings, the um sort of decorative arts, those kinds of things...

Koos: Well in terms of uh you know, he...his most interesting collection, I think it says worlds about his mind, and he showed it to me, he...he had Carol and I over, he and Ellen had Carol and I over, and it was to share his collections, that’s why we were all over and he’d pull out all of his toys and show them [Miner laughs]. And he reminded me so much of an eight-year-old when he was doing it, he was like ‘hey, look at my stuff’, you know.

Miner: So, he’d bring them out of storage areas or take you into their storage areas?

Koos: No, he’d bring them out, you know, or some storage areas were not vaults. The, uh, the collection that I like most, we went in to uh, study that was off to the right and uh...he had his desk there and he was just rummaging through these desk drawers and he pulls out this big

envelope. He says, 'what do you think of this?' and I looked at it and I said, 'I'm not sure what I'm looking at', I says it's letters addressed to Colonel House who was, was actually chief of staff and confidant for Woodrow Wilson. He said, 'yeah', he says 'but look at all the notations' and what it was, was Woodrow Wilson was hand forward addressing all the letters that were going to Colonel House and when Colonel House was not at the White House then...then Wilson would sit down and write the correct address himself and then get it back in the mail.

Miner: Oh my goodness.

Koos: And so, I mean that says tons. And Minor apparently was a Princeton, wherever he was going to school, he had a part time gig as an archivist, whether he was an intern or college you know paid student or whatever, and he was processing Colonel House papers and they were throwing these out, the envelopes out [Miner: wow] because some archivists don't keep envelopes, you know. And so he saw those and he says "oh my god, these are Woodrow Wilson's stuff" you know. And so I think this says a lot about the magic of collecting.

Miner: So tell us what the magic is. Tell us what it says.

Koos: You gain insight to the humanity of this person, this president. And here, the insight of this one is a certain amount of fuss budgetary and doing a kind of very menial task, a clerical kind of task, and he's president of the United States.

Miner: Okay, that's great. I didn't know anything about that kind of collecting for Minor either. See you've already told me two things I've never heard before. So, they were just the envelopes, and they had been discarded, and he thought because they had been forwarded and had been in the hand of President Wilson, that was...that was...

Koos: They were of value, and he was right. They are of value.

Miner: That's great.

Koos: They're little pieces of the light that tell you about this important person, you know.

Miner: That's great. Lovely, wow.

Koos: And were viewed as garbage.

Miner: Yeah, yeah right.

Koos: That's bottom feeding.

Miner: That, that's bottom feeding at its best, right, because he paid nothing then [laughs] that's great. So that was sometime when he was in school he got those.

Koos: Yeah, that was an old collection. We'll talk about family pieces, you know, he had, uh, both our families had in their family objects, the same statue. It was a mass produced Victorian

statue of the French composer musician Lully. And uh, who is a uh, 17th century figure in French music and uh, there's this pot metal statue with a bronze finish and a nicely cast bronze out of solid bronze. It was a nicely cast hands and face, okay. and so, he was at my house and says "oh, you have Lully." And I say, "oh yeah." And he says "oh, my dad had one, uh, my dad polished it all the time and yours has never been polished", I says, "you really like those" and he says "yeah" and I just wanted to piss him off and I says, "well, I have two of them, but I had to get rid of one of them" [both laugh] "You had two of them", you know, the idea that someone would have more than one, I mean, I just thought, well, I might do a little chain pulling here and see what happens, you know.

Miner: [laughs] Did he catch on or did you let him.

Koos: No, I let him go through the rest of his life [Miner: just a kidder] thinking that I owned two Lully's and he only had one, you know. So that the competitiveness there.

Miner: Oh my. Did he ever get rid of anything?

Koos: Did he ever get rid of anything? I can't answer that, I really don't know, I just, I mean I just don't know.

Miner: Did you trade anything with him? I mean if he found something that you liked, or does...

Koos: The only transactions I had with him were when he, uh, when we moved over to this building, um, there had been a large collection of non-relevant old books in museum collections, they were simply old books. And they were, most of them in English, some of them... and they were old books from, you know we had some from the 1720s up to the 1890s. So we had a big book sale because they had nothing to do with the mission of the museum and so Minor was quite a buyer at that. And uh, he um, so that's the only transaction I've had and that was simply you know representing the museum and of course we wanted to pick our own price and all that stuff but you know we always held to our own price. And he was, he found some nice stuff and I know it ended up in his permanent collection. He bought some first editions Newton's from us and some other things. I think he might have been the one who go the EA Poe Colonized first book, it was a plagiarized book of natural history that Edgar Allen Poe wrote to, uh make some money on. [both laugh]

Miner: I didn't know it was plagiarized. It's in our collection.

Koos: Well, I'm pretty sure Minor had it in his collection, he traded it...

Miner: No, no, no. it came to us through him. That's fun though, I never looked into the background of it.

Koos: My understanding of it is, it is was a deal on the part of...you know.

Miner: Yeah, yep. I thought it was odd that he would be an author of such a text.

Koos: Was there the George Washington facts, the George Washington's account book as uh...General of the Revolutionary War? Was that in there?

Miner: I don't recall that, but it could have been.

Koos: Because he had borrowed that from us and I could never get it back from him. He borrowed it from the museum, and I figured, I finally decided he was a member of the society of Cincinnatus and I decided that the society of Cincinnatus had some time since the early nineteenth century decided to suppress that work and destroy it whenever they ran into it. I think he borrowed from us in order to support his secret society.

Miner: Secret society.

Koos: Now that's a good story.

Miner: That's a great story.

Koos: I have no idea whether any of it is true but you know.

Miner: I love it. Did he talk to you...

Koos: He did actually never return it though.

Miner: Well, I'll see if it's in our database, because I know it's not physically in our collection, I swear [laughs] I'm not sworn to the society. Did he talk to you about any of those kinds of things, those groups, you know like the society of Cincinnatus or...?

Koos: Um, just that you know he wrote a book for them, on metals. And I helped him identify you know to work with Pantagraph Printing in printing it. But he didn't really talk about the meaning of it, very much. He was proud of it, otherwise he wouldn't have been involved in it. Um, he uh, I'm guessing that that stuff has more truck on the east coast than in the Midwest and so he would've used I guess he would've used that kind of thing more out there than here.

Miner: 'Cause he wasn't really a joiner. I mean he wasn't really a member of book groups you'd think a book collector would be a member of, it seems like that's the big group he belonged to, so.

Koos: Well, that's a hereditary society. He might have thought it was just cool you know, I just don't know. He never talked to me about the meaning of it, except for that he was eligible. It wasn't anything like where he was you know wearing a pin or anything like that.

Miner: True, and more to the point that I was trying to make was that he wasn't really a member of other groups, that you might think that he could belong to or, or...

Koos: Well he uh, he was a guy who was always moving along. Um his peripatetically almost to...the physics of peripatetic behavior he was just moving from point to point, place to place.

He's constantly exploring. So I don't know that he would've had enough time to sit down long enough to participate in anything like that he was so busy absorbing what he saw what he's around what he could learn from you know.

Miner: Do you think that that's a trait of why he'd be collecting widely was that for that or...

Koos: I think, I think those things were types of libraries, that he you know, you've had books, you know, why do you collect? Um, because you take intense pleasure from it. You really do, and you can come back and visit it, you know. I mean, I'm a...one thing I kind of collect, not at a level I'd like, is oriental rugs, I love them. At this point I have what, seven of them hanging on the walls because there's not floor space. That's kind of half nuts, you know. [both laugh] thank god the Russian's said it was okay to hang them on the walls. Its, its, it's because you really get a lot out of it.

Miner: So what would you get out of having more rugs than you can possibly stand on, what do they signify to you?

Koos: They are each unique works of art and they represent a traditional culture that is extraordinarily adept and abstract design. You've got to remember that the, much of that work is done by Muslims, and uh, representation of the living world, if you will, is not considered appropriate and so you're looking at people who generation after generation, and particularly I like the ones where the rug makers are traditional rug makers as opposed to working from designs that somebody else comes up with. That represents an ancient contact, that represents you know, some of shaking hands with some concept from five or six hundred years ago. And you get that out of...you get that out of pottery, you can get that out of a lot of different things. Cause it's a physical manifestation of other...it, it really is a sort of time machine if you know how to read it, if you know how to go on the trip.

Miner: That's great. With your kind of collecting, um, with artifacts, and I'd imagine there's reference materials that come with that kind of collecting interest, the...

Koos: Well...I...I'm...I would wonder if Minor is like. Sometimes you get through a subject and the collections become a residue of that – being fascinated with a subject. For a while, I was very interested in red pottery, uh red clay pottery, and would buy it and trade it, let the cats break it, I mean, I don't know things happen, read about it. Um...Carol and I for a while got crazy about pressed glass and so okay we're done with that.

Miner: But you still have it?

Koos: We still have it, yeah. You really sometimes have to, you do...we did art deco glass for a while. Uh we really got into it. And it's fun to collect with another person. It's fun to have someone to collect with. That way there's always space to make for it.

[both laugh]

Miner: Buy in, right? Getting buy in, literally and figuratively.

Koos: But, uh...it's a thing of mastering something, you know. You've become, and it's...it's, you become expert...Yeah, you can become expert. Uh, what do you do with expertise? You do it so you get better at understanding what it is that you're gathering.

Miner: For your personal fulfillment, for your personal education [Koos: yea, yea]. that's great. Um, you said you and Minor were competitive. Was he competitive, do you know, with anybody else in that kind of way?

Koos: I...I...I don't know. I uh...

Miner: Did he ever say I got something and so-and-so didn't? [laughs]

Koos: No, no...he...it's...it's like a hunter. A hunter is sort of happy that they got it and they'll show you but they're not gonna go on another person and say well, you know, you didn't. that's just bad sportsmanship [Miner: okay], and Minor is a good sportsman.

Miner: He was, okay. And he and Ellen collecting interests. So thinking about you and Carol, um, their collecting interest was furniture?

Koos: I think furniture, and I think that's where some of the Japanese stuff came in. You know, Ellen loved gem stones. [Miner: oh really?] Yea, and they would go to uh...uh...this New Mexico gemstone show once or twice a year.

Miner: Oh, I didn't know that.

Koos: And...uh, I think gemstones and fossils and that kind of stuff...uh...and uh. So Ellen would just delight in those gemstones, you know. And, I know just a couple of times, she bought Carol a couple of real nice pieces. She'd see a ring and she'd say, "oh that ring would look so much better, lemme go get you something" and she'd give her something for a ring that was set. Very gener...both of them very generous.

Miner: Right, yeah. So um...in the community, do you think that their reputation is, you know, generous, forgers of bonds was the same. Or outside of collecting circles or intellectual interests, would you say more business-like?

Koos: Well, that's a really complex question.

Miner: Okay.

Koos: That really is a very very complex question because the collecting thing was a personal expression, and Minor had completely different set of uh...of uh...ways of presenting for uh...his formal role as university president.

Miner: Okay. So...so, uh completely different aspect of his...

Koos: I would say his energy levels in the delightness of surprise were...were very similar. But, there was a control of it, for...to an end. And he used that, it crossed over some ways, the um...uh...his connection with his love of antique music or older music forms, antique instruments and what not, he uh...he found expression where he uh...I wanna say he produced a cassette tape...uh, involving um...boy, this is gonna be hard for me to get back to...um...Beckman, the guy who did Beckman instruments, I think he took some music courses at ISU when he was a kid, when he lived in town...

Miner: Arnold Beckman?

Koos: Arnold Beckman

Miner: Okay.

Koos: I think Minor produced an Arnold Beckman tape, it was like the Beckman Activity.

Miner: I know he did a book; I'll have to look for it

Koos: Well, I think he did...I think he did a cassette tape of violin music. And I don't know if they're Beckman comp...compositions or whether it was on violin at Beckman...I just don't recall what the Beckman connection was. All I recall is...at this point I'm figuring, it's violin music, it's Arnold Beckman connection.

Miner: But Minor playing the violin?

Koos: I don't know...uh...no, no I don't think so. I think they used one of the uh one of the music students.

Miner: Oh, okay.

Koos: But any case, that was a place where he was taking that...the sets of interest and weave them together in order to create a development product for the university.

Miner: Okay, and...and that's part of what one of the questions that I had was, where do these parts of his interests intersect? Or do they, right? So, um, obviously, he had public duties. Um...he had, he was all over campus I mean had presence in places where I think, since then, I don't know anything about Illinois Wesleyan really before then what presidents...well actually I do know what other presidents did...but it seemed to be unique in his character to be involved in as many things compared to other presidents. I mean, maybe, and in the community, did you see that...that kind of peripatetic involvement.

Koos: I'd say it was...I'd say it was different...

Miner: Okay.

Koos: His...his participation in community was different.

Miner: Different from?

Koos: Um...oh, different from Bob Eckley, for instance. Bob's uh...involvement in the community had to do with fiscal probity, with uh...um...the notion of uh...uh you know, the flow of money, and how community, what happens with wealth, and that kind of stuff. It was very...guy very hit with financial stuff. And so, in the community he was kind of...you know, would wear those robes if you will. Uh...and that was sort of the expression that Bob Eckley was.

Miner: Right.

Koos: Um...the uh...Minor never got into anything like that. He was, I would say...maybe what Minor was doing, I'll have to think about this. He was expressing what the Renaissance humanist was about, and that's in a sense what...what the...what links those kinds of passions, that broad stuff that this guy was involved in. you know, today we used that trite phrase, Renaissance man...but but...looking earlier...that class of humanist...somebody who finds what the...who links all this together is helping us understand what it is to be human and what that experience is about and the beauty of it, which is kind of a soft...soft thing to finance it. You know, but...but certainly something I'd say is really what motivated him. So for a liberal arts college, or university uh...having a humanist in charge makes a lot of sense, doesn't it?

Miner: It does [both laugh]. Yeah, I know it was uh...it was a big part of the dialogue I think with the new president, bringing the new president in um...that he um...that he had a solid academic background. You know, so...

Koos: But whether it's a potentially, you know...Bob had a solid academic background, I mean ... you know that's high end stuff. Um...no its, its...humanism is...is...is an expression of...of an appreciation of life uh...as it's viewed through types of celebration which I think music, art, collecting, reading books, connoisseurship is a part of that celebration.

Miner: That's great. I like that, connoisseurship. Hm. Do you think that the...uh...that the way that he expressed himself in the community was um...was perceived as...as that sort of celebration of life, or...I mean thinking of your comment about him crafting a sort of development product, I mean...the uh intent of uh some of his activities in the community, more towards oh I don't know...the meaning of...

Koos: I don't think he used the concept THE community. [Miner: okay,] okay...I...I...I, communities don't exist as "the's".

Miner: Oh, okay, right, sorry.

Koos: Um...and it's uh...it's a problem of categorical thinking. The um...there were people uh who loved antiquities who had marvelous times running into Minor and talking about that stuff, uh that's a community. That's a community.

Miner: Okay, that's true, yeah. Thank you for observing that. So there really is no distinction, there is no difference in those kinds of interactions?

Koos: Well your new, your new man uh...Eric Jensen uh is...loves traditional string band music, you know...

Miner: Right, yeah.

Koos: And he's going to be connecting in with his people who do string band music.

Miner: But not on a sort of intentional say like for Illinois Wesleyan kind of way.

Koos: I wouldn't say that Minor was doing anything for intentional for Illinois Wesleyan. But I would say, that if Eric ran into a prospect and just thought that string band music was the hottest thing in the world, he would make sure that there's a pretty decent band playing it and he'd have the sense to know what a good band was. Okay?

Miner: Okay, yeah, yeah.

Koos: You know it's just that if you got a card you play it.

Miner: Okay, alright, fair enough. Yea, and I definitely see both Eric and Elizabeth, you know, how it's a multilevel interest and President Wilson certainly had um, a deep sense of history as well so I think we've done well in those kinds of areas and exhibiting that multi...level of person, level of engagement in the world, if not the community. [laughs] I know, I can't stop putting the word THE in things [both laugh], I don't know what that means [laughs]. But it is something that I think is...is a holdover of stereotypical campus town and caps and gowns and stuff.

Koos: You know it's...

Miner: Probably an unfortunate aspersion or use on my part.

Koos: I would say Wesleyan really, people in town feel like Wesleyan is part of their town. I would say there's uh...that's not been a problem for Illinois Wesleyan [Miner: okay,]. I think there's a real feeling, kind of proprietorial pride ownership thing about Illinois Wesleyan. So I don't think there was ever this kind of split like that.

Miner: Hm, maybe I brought it in with me from the U of I [laughs] We won't speak to that, maybe. That's great. Well, what other kinds of things did you share, did you share passions with uh...Minor? Or maybe I should be talking to Carol too, should I be?

Koos: Well we tell...you know, you can talk to her, um, the thing about it is that you'd need any advice some spark and we'd both go off into some kind of sharing of information and good talk

about it. And so, the other things were about those moments of sharing that time and enjoying some kind of interest.

Miner: Do you know if he bought at auction?

Koos: I can't imagine that he didn't. you know, I never went to auctions myself, I just uh...the idea that someone was going to pay more money than me, fine you can have it. [both laugh] So, I'm a bottom feeder.

Miner: You're not that competitive.

Koos: No, well I am, on the...on the other end.

Miner: On the other end, interesting.

Koos: You have to do eBay that way. He did eBay, you know. Minor, when eBay first came out he told me he was just having a hell of a time starting work in the morning because he had seen all this stuff for sale and he'd been bidding on all these things and he knew he was supposed to be working but there was eBay [Miner laughs]. So, he was an early adapter of that. Actually, I think he was one that got me into it

Miner: Oh, really?

Koos: Yeah.

Miner: So putting bids on and then putting in and then raising a bit, I mean wouldn't that be the same as kind of an auction?

Koos: Well no, because with eBay you can plug something in at a level you're willing to pay cause that's what you decide you're willing to go for and see whether someone's gonna get it from you.

Miner: Oh, okay.

Koos: So you know, and what kind of stuff he bought at eBay I have no idea but what he was doing, he was having fun with that.

Miner: Um...do you know of any other book sellers other than Babbitt's that he dealt with in the area?

Koos: I think...uh, he bought from uh...Prairie Archives in Springfield. I don't know if he patronized Abraham Lincoln bookshop in Chicago or not, they're pretty expensive so he may have avoided them. I'm guessing, you know he travelled a lot that he had high end dealers that he was working with in other communities.

Miner: But not something that ever came up in conversation?

Koos: No.

Miner: And you don't think he sold anything or gave anything away?

Koos: Um...no I can't think of him doing that.

Miner: Did he ever talk to you about libraries and academic libraries, or?

Koos: Well the only thing that I heard was that he was and this was secondhand, that he was disappointed in the number of books that the Illinois Wesleyan library had and that he felt that it was his duty to expand the count in a significant way and lots of books ended up on the shelves.

Miner: And so that was very early on in his time here...

Koos: Yeah.

Miner: Because that was something he started right away

Koos: Yeah, and something he was very very concerned about, you know, having a library. And he thought the count of books was an important piece of that. Um...I think he knew that it was a library for uh...student research, I don't think he ever viewed it as a place for uh...that was going to be an academic library like U of I, anything like that. He was proud of the Powell plots, you know. He really liked those, well how can you not. They're an amazing collection to have there, you know. Um...I don't know, did he...I'm trying to think, whether he talked about any archival collections there and I don't ever remember him referencing any of them.

Miner: Um...do you know how he got to know so much about Powell? Was it through research for the book or was it...

Koos: Yeah, yep. He's kind of got to get into the subject to kind of master it. Wouldn't have taken him that long, you know, because it's a very quick mind, and a very fast reader, um...and has the capacity to absorb and synthesize what he's reading in a rapid manner.

Miner: That was one of my other questions, was did he read what he bought? [laughs]

Koos: You know, well some, you know. I mean it depends on whether you're buying for antiquity or you're buying for um...for knowledge. You know, what are you buying for.

Miner: It could be a mixed bag.

Koos: You know, I...I'm now disposing of my architectural library. You know Karen Johns, I think it's going down to U of I, and cataloging this stuff, 'cause I've never cataloged it before, and I'm realizing how little of it...how much of it I didn't use. There's a lot of it that I used, but it surprised me how much of it I never used. But I'm buying them because I thought I might. You know, so that's kind of what library is about. And so there may very well be aspects to anybody's collecting when you have a particular topic, and my topic was American Vernacular

Architecture. I wanted to know why it looked the way it did and how it was made. And I wanted to be able to do that in a pretty efficient manner so collecting books was a way of training my mind and training my eye so that I understood what I was looking at. And then there'd be books that I bought that I'm looking at, you know I paid three bucks for this or five bucks for that, so clearly I started buying this stuff back in the late seventies, uh...that I was buying stuff on speculation that I might use it. And I'm going to say that at least 1/3 of the stuff that I've got I bought on speculation that I thought might be useful.

Miner: Are you looking behind me because it's behind me?

Koos: Well, half of it is behind you now.

Miner: Oh, okay.

Koos: Half of it is over at Karen Johns.

Miner: Oh, okay...So she's really helping with this?

Koos: Yeah.

Miner: Wow. Okay.

Koos: And so, I don't know how much I...it turns out the rare stuff are...I collected walking towards Illinois communities, architectural walking tours, and apparently no libraries, libraries aren't cataloging and there's interesting stuff in them. There's some original research in them.

Miner: Yeah, and it's voiced how much time has changed. I think it's one thing you all hear, and museums do really well, is remind us of that.

Koos: Yeah.

Miner: Um, so some of these books are about the systems of architecture, so plumbing and joinery and so that's what you mean by you know, how things work, how things are put together, and how things are made.

Koos: Yeah, yep.

Miner: That's fantastic.

Koos: And there are, you know, magazines, books on painting, how to paint, how to lay brick, just...federal reports on farm housing um...

Miner: Um, one hundred years of handwork on the Rhine, is that right?

Koos: That one is one that...

Miner: What is that?

Koos: ...just popped into the, I...what happened on that one I think Father Deacon gave it to me, uh...it's German Catholic Churches of Bavaria really. They're Catholic Churches, and so I had that at home and since I sent stuff down to U of I, I figured, well it's architecture, someone could use it [Miner: maybe]. That, that one is not really one of those, yeah [laughs].

Miner: Sort of crept in

Koos: Sort of crept in, yeah.

Miner: From a gift, wow. Um...so, one of the questions that I had about Minor as a collector was, was he informing his own research? And you sort of answered...

Koos: Help me understand that question a little.

Miner: ...So he wrote books about Illinois Wesleyan, Arnold Beckman, he wrote books about American furniture, he wrote books about places that he lived other than Illinois Wesleyan, um...and some of that I think ended up in his collection but, how much of that sort of thing inform a writing, I mean a personal collection inform what you're writing about versus you know, research in the McLean County Archives or the McLean County museum and how all that stuff mixes up and mashes up...

Koos: I would say...I...I...I will speak to my experience on it, and it is that you develop these collections because there is no private entity or public entity that has developed a collection on the one that you need for your work.

Miner: 'Cause he did a documentary history of American interiors.

Koos: Yeah, yep. I just gave my copy of that here to the museum. We have a copy of it...it's a good book, a good book, it really is.

Miner: And look at the sources...

Koos: And five bucks will get you a copy.

Miner: Alright, five bucks for this book.

Koos: Yeah.

Miner: Alright, well we have one in the library.

Koos: You could have one on your own with that price.

Miner: Also true. The kinds of sources that he was using are postcards, and magazines, and things of that nature.

Koos: He was probably out buying postcards and magazines in order to do it.

Miner: Yeah.

Koos: Our public libraries don't collect the kinds of books that I've got here and as I'm looking at this point I'm going to say U of I probably has 80% of what I've got, and so I don't know what they're going to do with it. They didn't say no we don't want it, so you know.

Miner: Would you be, if they said they didn't want it, would you say you want it back or have you had your fun of it? Cause some collectors do that.

Koos: Well um...I wouldn't want it back because I don't have any place for it. Um...I would hope that they would um...that they would take what they need and if they were to sell the rest to benefit the university that would be fine. I don't know if they do that or not, you know.

Miner: I met a collector not too long ago who had his own code that he would put in his own secret place in his books you know to see how he paid for it or when he got it, that sort of thing. Are you that kind of collector where you would...

Koos: The internet has broken the back of book value.

Miner: Okay.

Koos: Their books don't have any value anymore. Uh, except what really, you know the gold mark. The first editions, the Scott Fitzgerald, you know, the uh...the beautifully prepared twenty edition, with so and so and such and such. But uh...the run of the mill stuff, I would say, that if I get in a tax deduction, ten cents on a dollar, I's be happy. Because it's just what has happened, is that books are no longer rare. The internet has made books common. And uh...things that I could've gotten twenty-five bucks for I can get for three or four dollars.

Miner: Because you can essentially see inside every store so to speak.

Koos: Well, its...it's more of a situation that scarcity drives price and you might have scarcity in Bloomington of a book on 1850 house painting but you aggregate books on 1850 house painting, uh...throughout the United States and there might be seven of them on the market and some are going to have one for the lowest price because they didn't pay anything for it or they paid little for it you know. Its just the way that market functions, its uh...I didn't buy this stuff to make money on it, I didn't buy it as an investment. I bought it as a research tool. And I did scholarship with it, and I did historic district work with it, I did restoration work with it. A chunk of my career has been involved with interpretation preservation, and that was cool you know. And so what's a carpenter to do with three extra hammers. Gets rid of them and holds the one, you know. [both laugh] I mean that's really the way I look at it you know.

Miner: That's great. So the kind of person who would, pre internet, mark a book to say how much they paid for it would presumably get pleasure to sell a book at a higher price or at least seeing it appreciate in value.

Koos: Yeah, the feeling of victor. The feeling of victory. Yeah, but that strikes me as fuss budgetry but some cultures are that way. Its, they like to catalog things. Some people really like to catalog things, I don't. I mean I'll do it but I don't particularly care for it.

Miner: Do you know if Minor was that kind of collector?

Koos: No.

Miner: Could you characterize what kind of collector her was, I mean were talking all around it.

Koos: He was a collector who field his curiosity of the world by focusing on certain segments of certain periods of time for the sheer delight of it.

Miner: Cool, that's great. Who says you have to have an ulterior motive. Right, on a hunt.

Koos: Yeah, right. It's its I mean, but it's not a soft sense kind of enjoyment. It's uh...what makes us mentally sharp. What makes us interesting as human beings and uh these kinds of drives to know and understand is being reflected in this curious way of collecting. But that same drive to know and understand to master is also used in running a university.

Miner: So cross over of capabilities.

Koos: Sure, and capacity.

Miner: Yeah, the ability to do that, yeah.... Did you go to the auction?

Koos: No.

Miner: Do you remember it being advertised or talked about at all or...

Koos: The only thing I recall is that the museum was asked to review a set of books and we did and suggest that there was some of them that we might want but they never came to us and that's my only recollection of it. I remember Ben Rhodes dropping by...uh...the uh there's a decencian thing about seeing some distribution of some dead mans property over the auction block. Its kind of distasteful. It was a Christmas carol, a Christmas future of going through Scrooge's stuff

Miner: What do you think Minor would've thought of it?

Koos: He would've found an ugly surprise.

Miner: I'm asking everybody so. Are there other things of Minor as a collector we should be thinking about or know about... Any influences he had on you?

Koos: I wouldn't say he had any influences on me as a collector. Except for the competitive piece I probably bought far more cookbooks than I ever needed. The effect is just the enjoyment of it. It's fun to have someone to have fun with it.

Miner: Did he talk to you about why he loved cookbooks? You said your interest was corn.

Koos: Did he say why he liked them? I can't say that he did. Did we collect for the same things? I can say that we were both collecting American um...I was occasionally trying to do recipes. I think he was as well. I remember him and Ellen brought over Christmas cookies that they made out of an old cookbook so they were doing things like that out of it so things like that, just to have fun with it.

Miner: That's great.

Koos: But you know it was one aspect of him. Was it a trait that people remember him but, and uh...like for instance the statue doesn't look like a collector does it?

Miner: [laughs] No it doesn't.

Koos: You know there's not four fiddles, there's one.

Miner: That's true. Not with a bunch of bows, I heard he was a bow collector. Did he ever talk to you about his music collections?

Koos: No.

Miner: No, so it's not something you shared.

Koos: Well he'd talk about aspects of his collection if you were doing it yourself and so he had a lot of collections and so he had a lot of different people to talk about a lot of different aspects.

Miner: That's true. Well I think that's the extent of my questions. But if you think of other things I would be delighted to hear them.

Koos: I think you tapped me out pretty well, I didn't know I had this much to say on the topic. But knowing there's so much to say on the speculation of it, I can really use that as a filler.

Miner: You know, that's what it's all about. We let the historians sort it out. Well thanks again for your time, really appreciate it.