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John "Jack" Muirhead

John Muirhead

Meg Miner

Illinois Wesleyan University, mminer@iwu.edu

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Oral History Interview with John "Jack" Muirhead
in Hansen Student Center, March 28th, 2016,
Conducted by Meg Miner, Illinois Wesleyan Archivist

Meg Miner: Good morning! This-

Jack Muirhead: Good morning.

Miner: This is March 28th, 2016. I'm Meg Miner, and I'm working on a sabbatical project on Minor Myers Jr., his presidency, his collecting interests, and really how all of that sort of influenced people and the places around him. And I'm here today in the Hansen Student Center with Jack Muirhead. Jack, please introduce yourself, how you're affiliated with Wesleyan, and Minor and we'll go from there.

Muirhead: My name is Jack Muirhead, John W. Muirhead. I went to school at Wesleyan. I was here from '58 until '62 and came back to Wesleyan when my wife got a teaching job- came back to the Wesleyan area when my wife got a teaching job here in '72. We lived close to campus, lived on Prairie Street where the library is today, and probably that proximity to Minor- his home is the reason I did know him a bit.

Miner: Before the building went up? Did he come over and say, "Thank you for....[both laugh]...giving us your plot of land,?" I'm sure it was a little more complicated than that.

Muirhead: If...I don't know if- to me this is- this is kind of an interesting background because we bought our home in '74. At that time, there were probably two vacant spots on the two block area where the library is today.

Miner: Mm-hmm.

Muirhead: And we knew Wesleyan owned some of the property and obviously it was an area in which they might expand, and we watched perhaps a house perhaps a house being raised every year-

Miner: Mm-hmm.

Muirhead: -and got down to Slater's house on East Street and several houses on the block which we lived and there was talk then of, you know, Wesleyan putting a library up. Things proceeded I think more quickly than I expected. I think some money might have been raised as a- money became available. And we were kind of faced with moving and selling to Wesleyan with enough time with being able to have some choice-

Miner: Mm-hmm.

Muirhead: -in where we moved, or, you know, just sticking it out til the end and- and I think there were three houses left on the block on which we lived when we- when we sold. And I wasn't happy.

Miner: Mmm.

Muirhead: I loved the house that we lived in and it was a four-square with nice woodwork.

Miner: Oh.

Muirhead: We moved into a very nice house, much more expensive, and it never felt like my house.

Miner: Oh dear.

Muirhead: It was this- this house was- was on- I liked but I remember Minor, when he gave us a tour of the new library before it officially opened- but the structure was all up. I was with a group of people and we walked in. Minor said, "And over- over here-" this little checkout desk, "This is where Jack Muirhead's kitchen used to be."

Miner: [laughs] Oh no! Oh!

Muirhead: [laughs] We could see- see each other.

Miner: Oh!

Muirhead: So I- I- I appreciated that actually. I mean, he- and I think that- one of the things I remember about him is that he knew everybody. He knew- he- he really paid attention to his environment-

Miner: Yeah.

Muirhead: -the things around him, and I think that's one of the things that I really liked about him and I think lots of people, especially in this community did too.

Miner: Yeah. Did- he'd never been in your home then?

Muirhead: Yeah, I think he'd been in my home.

Miner: He had? Okay.

Muirhead: In fact- and we'd been in his home. As soon as they moved in, we ran into Ellen before school had started and we got talking and it came up that we had been in Sri Lanka and she said, "Well, Minor loves to cook Indian food. Why don't you come over tonight?"

Miner: Oh!

Muirhead: And I think, "He just got here!" [laughs] And- so I thought, "Well, we can do that. Maybe we can bring something." But she insisted that he was a great cook. He had this curry recipe that he would do, so kind of feeling so of sheepish about it, we went over, stood in the kitchen, watched him cook, and, you know, the- the first time I had been in the president's house and this was just- I think it was just weeks after they moved in or a few days after.

Miner: So before the start of the term?

Muirhead: Before the start of the term, right.

Miner: So he hadn't even been inaugurated yet.

Muirhead: I don't think so.

Miner: You gave him his own inauguration. [laughs]

Muirhead: Yeah, yeah. I-

Miner: Feed the community and they will follow. [laughs]

Muirhead: Feed the- Exactly. Yeah.

Miner: That's so fun!

Muirhead: Yeah.

Miner: Do you remember anything about how- how that evening played out? I mean, was he-
Muirhead: He was-

Miner: -like anybody can come? Sure thing? Happy to have you here?

Muirhead: Happy to have you here. Not surprised. [Miner laughs] He could have- I don't know if it created tension or not. I think it could have created tension in our home, if I had invited somebody to come over and Pam had come home from work and we were going to watch her cook-

Miner: Yeah.

Muirhead: But he- no. He- he seemed perfectly comfortable with that-

Miner: Wow.

Muirhead: -and just a normal thing.

Miner: Wow! That's so funny. So I'm thinking. Prairie Street and what? Prairie and-

Muirhead: Prairie and Grand. We were one house down from Grand.

Miner: Prairie and Grand, okay.

Muirhead: So, you know, with the buildings gone. I mean, there's still things going on in the library, on the second floor, third floor and look out. The sightlines are the same once you kind of get up a little bit.

Miner: Oh!

Muirhead: And, you know, I can feel where I was in the house, you know, where I am in relationship to the president's building, and where that would have been in the house that we lived.

Miner: I love- one of my favorite pictures I think is looking- let's see, it would be south from the Powell monument-

Muirhead: Mm-hmm.

Miner: -or no, the Hedding bell, before the theatre building went up, 'cause you can look right down at a row of houses on either side-

Muirhead: Mm-hmm. Mm-hmm.

Miner: -of that. It's just a wonderful- I just love the landscapes are. Sorry to have your house sacrificed, but thank you for...[Muirhead laughs]. So it was a good long time you were there. Twenty, almost twenty-five years. When did they- when did they-

Muirhead: We were there for about twenty years.

Miner: Oh, okay. So you moved out before they bought- broke ground.

Muirhead: Mm-hmm.

Miner: They broke ground in '99.

Muirhead: Yeah. And they- was it '99?

Miner: Mm-hmm. Yeah.

Muirhead: Okay. I remember standing under the linden tree on the corner-

Miner: So was that for the ground-breaking?

Muirhead:-for the groundbreaking. For the ceremony, yeah.

Miner: Oh my! Huh. Wow.

Muirhead: Yeah.

Miner: Well, any time I meet someone who used to live there, thank you for your contribution.

Muirhead: Oh, you're welcome!

Miner: 'Cause I love that they kept some of the old trees-

Muirhead: Yeah.

Miner: -from that neighborhood. It's nice too that they didn't just rip them up.

Muirhead: Right. Right.

Miner: Yes. We do our best to make- be worthy.

Muirhead: You know, I think...which building it was...one of the- that was one of the things that- I- I think of Minor a couple of times in relationship to trees.

Miner: Okay.

Muirhead: One was when he was- I don't know if it's the science building. What's the building behind the Stevenson center to- to the northeast?

Miner: That's the Center of Natural Sciences. Yeah.

Muirhead: Okay.

Miner: Mm-hmm. It used to be tennis courts.

Muirhead: Yeah. [laughs]

Miner: Yeah.

Muirhead: Alright. I...I remember him selling the trees that they were keeping and...

Miner: Wow!

Muirhead: -the thought that went into, you know, where the building was going to be and- and what was, you know, to keeping a...you know, keeping a tree, a very mature tree that was there and another time I heard Minor speak at a commencement service he- ceremony, he spoke of being there under the trees that probably were on campus in, you know, 1850 or whatever...[Miner laughs]...I remember thinking, "I don't think so." I think maybe that's a nice story, but I'm not sure-

Miner: That whole- Dutch elm disease. He hadn't figured that out yet. That wasn't part of our history yet.

Muirhead: There were trees that preceded the Dutch Elm...disease I suppose, but I...just question his judgment on the trees right where we were sitting...[Miner laughs]...but- but I, you know, he was...he just had this interest in the past and...the local history.

Miner: Local history too. Okay. Which enters into your passion, right?

Muirhead: Yeah. Really early, you know, he was going down to the, well, Babbitt's bookstore and the historic society and picking up tidbits. I suppose that worked for him, you know, when

he...did introductions and made speeches and things like that, but he was picking up historical tidbits-

Miner: Oh!

Muirhead: -that were Roman-

Miner: Yeah-

Muirhead: -you know, so-

Miner: And are you affiliated with both Babbitt's and the old house society- or no, sorry, the Mclean county museum?

Muirhead: I have been over the years.

Miner: Okay. I was just wondering about how you knew about the tidbit picking up, you know, kind of things.

Muirhead: I guess I just picked that up. It was...I- I think even this getting the John Wesley Powell...the- the statue made, the- the promotion of- of him, I had gone to school here, had never heard of John Wesley Powell. Here was Minor, with a liberal arts education, had went around and recognized, you know, this is a big name in history, in American hisotry.

Miner: Oh!

Muirhead: So he promoted that connection.

Miner: Yeah.

Muirhead: So exactly collecting, but it's the wide range of interests he has and-

Miner: Sure.

Muirhead: -and connecting to the past and connecting to the place.

Miner: And pulling it up at an appropriate time, right?

Muirhead: Oh yeah. His ability to do that was remarkable I think.

Miner: What other times do you remember him doing that besides the tree? [Miner laughs]

Muirhead: I remember- it's a little different I think but...when he'd introduce a speaker he'd respond. He'd make remarks after the person had spoken, always making great connections between what was said, maybe what was happening currently, how it connected to other things that were taking place-

Miner: World events?

Muirhead: World events.

Miner: Oh!

Muirhead: Yeah. He was- he was great at, you know, on a spot-

Miner: Hmm.

Muirhead: -making connections in my mind.

Miner: So how was it different from what you had seen before? Cause you were obviously part of the community during the Berthoff era-

Muirhead: Mm-hmm.

Miner: -and then you moved back here in the Eckley era.

Muirhead: Mm-hmm. Yeah.

Miner: And since Pamela's teaching then, you probably already heard a lot of campus stories.

Muirhead: Mm-hmm.

Miner: You know, you're in a pretty good position to- to comment on changes over-

Muirhead: That's really- that's a good question. I don't know that I'm a good- I was a good enough observer.

Miner: Oh. Okay, just thought I'd ask.

Muirhead: No, I think it's an excellent question. The campus was very small in '58. I believe there were Civil War- not Civil War, World War II barracks where the tennis court was.

Miner: Yeah. Yeah. Oh. Okay.

Muirhead: I believe still standing for a year or two while I was still there.

Miner: Okay.

Muirhead: Old North-

Miner: Mm-hmm.

Muirhead: -was where I had my first English class.

Miner: Oh my!

Muirhead: Buck was the library.

Miner: Hmm.

Muirhead: That- that was- that and Presser were the, you know, substantial buildings. Buck had these beautiful big tables and woodwork and was a nice place to sit and read and stuff.

Miner: Was it?

Muirhead: Mm-hmm. It felt- you know, it just felt foreign to me. You know, it was- it felt like you were in a place of learning but it was

Miner: The big, arched, vaulted roofs, yeah. The cathedral style of library building. Yeah. Yeah. That's the effect that they were going for.

Muirhead: Yeah. Right?

Miner: Yeah. That's wonderful.

Muirhead: Yeah. But we didn't get off campus very much.

Miner: Hmm.

Muirhead: I mean, very few people had cars and- and I don't remember much beyond the campus except going down where Casey's grocery shop...nursery shop is today, nursery...nursery center. That was a grocery store.

Miner: T

Muirhead: So that's where we got our sandwiches for Sunday meals. But otherwise we weren't off campus.

Miner: That's it?

Muirhead: I wasn't off campus very much.

Miner: Yeah.

Muirhead: It was very small. You knew most of your professors. There were very few...they lived- they tended to live very near campus. Some of them lived in very small houses. Most of those are gone now.

Miner: Hmm.

Muirhead: But- and- and I think people who went to school when I did would see the junior/senior humanities course as the key experience that we had together. So- and we came back and President Eckley was here. I don't have anything to do- offer I think in terms of leadership.

Miner: That's okay.

Muirhead: Except I did think his concern about the appearance of the campus was extremely important. I mean, the- the transformation of the landscaping and- really made it special, and it seemed to me that with the highway system that we had, there was pretty easy access from the north, south, east to the northeast, and...with the driving culture at that time, it was just located about two hours away from a lot of populated areas.

Miner: Yeah.

Muirhead: That- so it was, you know, it was- it was becoming a pretty campus. I think it must have helped in attracting students. I mean, I guess we know that he did go after some faculty members I think with credentials, very good credentials.

Miner: Hmm. Mm-hmm.

Muirhead: I think over the- in the fifties, sixties there were faculty members here who were good, but I think it just, you know, faculty definitely was strengthened. More money was being spent I think.

Miner: Hmm.

Muirhead: People always talk about it being very frugal, but compared to what had come before, but...[Miner laughs]...I think that- that money- the country was becoming more prosperous and-

Miner: Hmm.

Muirhead: -but yeah. But Minor was....he was really a- I suppose I was- I was married to Pam, a faculty member and lived near his house, but he just seemed very approachable, very accessible, and always interested in something.

Miner: That's great.

Muirhead: Yeah.

Miner: Did you guys go to his house for events then too?

Muirhead: Not really- very much.

Miner: Okay.

Muirhead: I'm not much of a social...[laughs]...person.

Miner: So tell- tell us about what you do in the community and how your paths crossed in the community then. Or did they, I guess?

Muirhead: More- I guess I would be- let's see. Well, I was still teaching school. I was a grade school teacher and I was very involved with the Museum of History and the Black History Project, which was- got a lot of support from- from the Museum of History, from Greg Koos. And Minor supported the Black History Project. He gave us space in the old library. We got cabinets, a desk. It was a place where we could bring all of our working files, our research, records. We had a lot of- of oral interviews with research on the families that were, you know, had been interviewed. It's- so he was always aware, I think, of what we were doing and very supportive. I mean, he gave us Wesleyan space.

Miner: But it was pretty clearly- it was this Museum of History project.

Muirhead: Yeah. Yeah. Yeah. I think so. But that- I mean, Wesleyan would send out mailings for us, do publicity for us.

Miner: That's great!

Muirhead: He supported that. Robert Wright Wagner, who was secretary of the English house, would do posters and so- so he gave us a lot of support.

Miner: What do you- what do you think that did for the group then? What do you think that signaled or the significance of it?

Muirhead: Well, it signaled...Mildred Pratt, who is a...do you know?

Miner: Mm-hmm.

Muirhead: Okay. It signaled to her that this was a really- a welcoming place, a place where that supported the local- local black history work that she was doing, and so...I don't know. We had meetings in various places but we always knew that we could meet at Wesleyan if we wanted to. We knew that if we had a good program, Minor would get behind it. I...when things like that happen, you sometimes take them for granted, I- I guess-

Miner: Mm-hmm.

Muirhead: -but it was a combination of his interests and his concern. He- he wanted to be welcoming to black students and he wanted to be...yeah. Don't know- I don't know if I knew him well enough to know exactly what the motivation was there-

Miner: Sure. Yeah.

Muirhead: -but always felt like it was a very, very sincere effort to reach out to the local black community and to black students generally in-

Miner: Do you know if Mildred Pratt already had a relationship on campus? Because, of course, now we have the Pratt Foundation-

Muirhead: Yeah.

Miner: -in music.

Muirhead: Mm-hmm.

Miner: So that did not pre-date-

Muirhead: I don't think so.

Miner: -your involvement in that.

Muirhead: I believe that-

Miner: Do you think that that was like that we make a connection between-

Muirhead: I think so.

Miner: Okay.

Muirhead: I'm not the person. Maybe Pam might know better-

Miner: Sure.

Muirhead: -but some of the people who would know for sure are probably already deceased, but-

Miner: Yeah.

Muirhead: But I- I definitely think so.

Miner: 'Cause in some communities- I- I went to the U of I and there's a- there's sometimes a tension between town and gown, right?

Muirhead: Mm-hmm.

Miner: You know, so sometimes these kinds of programs are deliberate efforts and sometimes they're just because people have an interest and passion and seek connections that- that are mutually beneficial.

Muirhead: Mm-hmm.

Miner: So I'm not saying there's any sort of agenda or anything with it, just-

Muirhead: Mm-hmm. Yeah.

Miner: -sort of teasing out the origins of these things, 'cause it's lovely when you start seeing the connections-

Muirhead: Mm-hmm.

Miner: -and how they weave in and out of a community.

Muirhead: Yeah.

Miner: Hmm.

Muirhead: Yeah.

Miner: And we also hold the records for the Pratt family.

Muirhead: Right. Oh that-

Miner: And I was-

Muirhead: Absolutely.

Miner: -very sad that we lost the Black History project, but I understood, you know, that it was founded by McLean County and of course-

Muirhead: That- that was a natural-

Miner: Yeah.

Muirhead: -place to go.

Miner: Yeah.

Muirhead: But- and they had- they had a collection that predated the-

Miner: Mm-hmm.

Muirhead:-work that Mildred had-

Miner: Oh yeah. It's a wonderful organization and wonderful facility, so that's a- what good work, you know. All of that is for the community, so-

Muirhead: And actually- my memory slipped so quickly. Huh. I had just made a couple of connections while you were making those connections and it kind of slipped-

Miner: About programming,

Muirhead: In connection with the town. Yeah.

Miner: Yeah.

Muirhead: The Pratt Foundation...yeah, definitely. The- Minor's interest in music was central to that too. I think...yeah. My mind's slipping-

Miner: It's okay.

Muirhead: [laughs] -right now.

Miner: We can go on and it may come back, you know.

Muirhead: Maybe. Sometimes it does. [laughs]

Miner: So are there other ways that you recall seeing Minor?

Muirhead: Not...probably not. It- it would- these aren't very direct connections, but we had mentioned Babbitt's, the Gridley antiques store-

Miner: Mm-hmm.

Muirhead: -the historical society. These...we'd go to those places and, you know, often and we come in and talk a bit and then somebody would say, "Well, your president was down here this morning and looking at this and this and this and this." [Miner laughs] And- and so you- so you kind of- you just saw the breadth of his interests. He was interested in antiques. He was interested in books. He was interested in sheet music. He was- the old...local histories, and I...that...it just felt good to know that he was interested in these things. I don't know that many faculty members have, you know-

Miner: That widespread of an interest in life-

Muirhead: Yeah.

Miner: -or topics?

Muirhead: Yeah. I mean, they're, you know, just really burdened with teaching and, you know, and all that. But...I just don't see it for the most part, so- getting absorbed in the community-

Miner: Sure.

Muirhead: -that much. And I'm not sure...yeah.

Miner: That's okay.

Muirhead: Yeah.

Miner: Do you collect things yourself?

Muirhead: Minor asked me that once, and I remember the time he asked me about that.

Miner: Oh!

Muirhead: We were moving to- moving Bob Bray from- a very short distance between houses and actually were carrying house- stuff down the street. The English department-

Miner: Oh! [laughs]

Muirhead: -kind of led by how hungry for- Barb Bowman used to move people when we were younger, and-

Miner: Yeah.

Muirhead: -more often. And Minor heard about people carrying stuff and so he hurried over and helped carry boxes and he asked me, you know, about this collecting. I guess that was the first time that I realized he was such a serious collector and, you know, later learned about his musical instruments and that kind of thing. But yeah. No, I don't think I'm a collector, but I-

Miner: Oh! [laughs] But you frequent the same shops.

Muirhead: I frequent the same place and whenever I've- you know, I'm interested in the same things, by those history books whenever they were available, and I- you know, I do collect the stories and information that I can- from- you know. But not in the sense of having a collection of some kind of an artifact. I-

Miner: Hmm.

Muirhead: -I haven't done that.

Miner: Did you get a sense of why he might be asking you a question like that or-

Muirhead: I don't- maybe to make conversation, you know, if he found- found another obsessive person, you know. [Miner laughs] Yeah.

Miner: Yeah. Okay.

Muirhead: I'm a person who's pretty much, you know, on the periphery of the Wesleyan community and it just- for me, it was always flattering to- you don't know that this person knows- knows you, knows something about you, and is interested in you and-

Miner: Sure.

Muirhead: -that...yeah. I guess it was for me flattering. [laughs]

Miner: Nice.

Muirhead: We...I guess I probably don't have much- anything else to really say that I can think of right now. Probably saw Ellen more on the sidewalk than Minor and she had- her oldest son was about the age of our son and she kind of always took an interest in how our son was doing.

Miner: Nice. Did they play?

Muirhead: Yeah.

Miner: Did the kids play in the neighborhood?

Muirhead: They played. They played. They went to different schools, but when they were young they played together.

Miner: Oh.

Muirhead: Yep. So- but that's probably about all I have.

Miner: What grade school did you teach at?

Muirhead: I taught at- at the time Minor was here I taught at Sheridan School.

Miner: Hmm.

Muirhead: Fourth and fifth grade.

Miner: 'Cause Ellen taught.

Muirhead: She taught at the-

Miner: At (name of school, 32:14??). Yeah

Muirhead: (name of school, 32:14??) Right.

Miner: So did you guys talk about teaching or anything?

Muirhead: No. Not really.

Miner: Yeah. I mean, but-

Muirhead: Yeah. No, I never- no.

Miner: Sure. Sidewalk encounters may not be conducive to chalk talk.

Muirhead: Well...honestly, that...that felt like a different- I- she- she taught- did she teach language?

Miner: French. Yeah.

Muirhead: And...(name of school, 32: 46??) and Sheridan would be so completely different-

Miner: Are they?

Muirhead: -worlds that a lot of the, you know, social-economic dimension would be...yeah. I- I just never- no, I never did.

Miner: Is- what is it you taught at Sheridan?

Muirhead: I was just a fourth grade, fifth grade teacher. So-

Miner: Everything. [laughs]

Muirhead: -everything. Yeah, everything except the-

Miner: Just everything.

Muirhead: Everything except, you know, music and- and art. There were even years when I did some of that.

Miner: Yeah. Yeah. Was your major in-

Muirhead: My major was history.

Miner: History?

Muirhead: And I had- I did student teaching at Lincoln, Illinois, and...I taught high school in Chicago one year and then high school in Waukegan for two years. Then after we moved down here, I couldn't get a high school teaching job and...somebody suggested, you know, get an elementary certificate, so that was pretty easy. At the time, it wasn't that hard to do.

Miner: Hmm.

Muirhead: So I did that and eventually, you know, eventually it worked out.

Miner: Sure. Yeah.

Muirhead: All while substitute teaching and that's the-

Miner: Yeah. It's a long road out.

Muirhead: It was. It was.

Miner: Wow.

Muirhead: But it got- when I first looked for teaching jobs, it felt like it was easy to find a job.

Miner: Yeah.

Muirhead: And then when we came here, it felt, “Oh, I’m never going to get a teaching job again.”

Miner: Hmm. Hmm.

Muirhead: But I did.

Miner: Yeah. Was it just glut in the market of-

Muirhead: There was glut in the market at the time and I already had had- I had a Masters degree and a couple of years teaching experience and that put me higher on the pay scale so-

Miner: It’s hard when you’re in a town that produces teachers, so-

Muirhead: Right. [Miner laughs] Right. Right. Exactly.

Miner: Yeah. Well, is there anything you think we should know about or-

Muirhead: Probably can’t help you with anything else.

Miner: Have a great day.

Muirhead: Thanks.