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Richard Nielsen

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Oral History Interview with Richard Nielsen,
In Hansen Student Center, January 19th, 2016
Conducted by Meg Miner, Illinois Wesleyan Archivist

Meg Miner: My name is Meg Miner. I am the archivist at Wesleyan- Illinois Wesleyan, and I am on a sabbatical project where I'm working on...people's recollections of Minor Myers Jr. as a collector and in other ways they might find interesting to share with us. Today is January 19th, and I'm in the Hansen Center with Richard Nielsen. Thank you so much for joining us today. I- I really appreciate your time, and I wanted to start by having you tell us where you're from, how you got connected with Minor, and how long that relationship was, the nature and I guess the duration of that relationship.

Richard Nielsen: My name is Richard Nielsen. I am- I should start with how I got related to Illinois Wesleyan so that I could meet Minor.

Miner: Sure, okay.

Nielsen: I graduated from Illinois State University. However, my wife graduated from Illinois Wesleyan in 1985. So we have always followed along Wesleyan when we were back in town. She worked for State Farm, we'd been transferred out and back in.

Miner: Hmm.

Nielsen: So when we came back we picked up, following what was going on at Illinois Wesleyan University, followed the basketball, traveled with all them.

Miner: Sure.

Nielsen: Anyway we knew President Myers, and at homecoming we'd be up. We'd see him about all the time at the basketball games with this green tie on that he had and...[Miner laughs]. But he had set up through- Tom Joyce I think was one of the main people that helped organize his book fair down in the Shirk Center. And so that's where I really got to see and visit with him occasionally 'cause I like to collect P.G. Wodehouse books.

Miner: And was that book fair that was- were you there for like the very first one?

Nielsen: I don't know if I was there for the first one, but I sure made it-

Miner: Okay. [laughs]

Nielsen: -made it there for the- real early on.

Miner: Okay.

Nielsen: 'Cause they had- I'm trying to think, 'cause I remember seeing the pattern set up inside and- and they must of had I'm thinking seven or eight or more dealers set up various spaces.

Miner: Sure.

Nielsen: Tom Joyce was one of them. And so I would go in there and I would be looking for Wodehouse stuff or something, book about books. And there's Minor in there, perusing through the tables, the same thing as I was.

Miner: Hmm.

Nielsen: And it just struck me as- as here's a president of a university, down here with everyone else, looking for something to add to his collection. I didn't really know at that time what he collected, but he was always looking over his glasses at the tables and the books and had something in there. But he always had time to talk to you.

Miner: Hmm.

Nielsen: We would- I- you know, we would say hello, visit. Was he finding what he wanted, and I would explain to him I was looking for things about Wodehouse, and- and so that was just the extent. Just a few minutes with him, but it was year after year that the book fair was going on that you could always count on seeing President Myers at- at the book fair going through a book, going through every table. He didn't miss one of them.

Miner: Hmm. So he was very thorough.

Nielsen: He was.

Miner: Did he ever make recommendations to you after- I mean, I don't know, it doesn't sound you knew him like in between the fairs.

Nielsen: No. I mean, occasionally in the President's- through donations we would have a meal, at the President's house, you know, he would mess around with people-

Miner: Oh, sure.

Nielsen: -for the donors, and we would- I'd always comment about- ask him if he found anything for his collection there at the book fair and he would say, "Yes, I found something, this that or the other." I can't ever remember specifically what he added, but he always added something. He always had something under his arm as he was going out the door.

Miner: Hmm. Hmm.

Nielsen: So I know he made purchases at that- the book fair and I missed the book fair. [laughs]

Miner: Oh no!

Nielsen: I missed the book fair.

Miner: Yeah.

Nielsen: So anyway, that- that is mostly my interaction with President Myers.

Miner: So did he talk to you about what he was collecting or- or-

Nielsen: He did not. I- you know, I didn't really ask. I- I had- he did ask me what I was looking for.

Miner: Okay.

Nielsen: And I told him I was looking for Wodehouse books or books about books. And so that was interesting and he would write back perusing for things, so anyway. And I didn't really want to take up all his time-

Miner: Sure.

Nielsen:-I know it was limited, so-

Miner: Sure.

Nielsen: I just- but it was always fun to be able to talk to a president of the university when he's down there.

Miner: Well, I don't know too much about the origin of the book fair, but I'm thinking that you're probably right. It was him, his idea. [laughs]

Nielsen: Right.

Miner: What do you think that did for this community? I mean, you said you'd like to see it come back. What- what do you think the importance- was it well-attended?

Nielsen: Mmm, there you've got me. I mean, it was never crowded to where you couldn't move.

Miner: Okay.

Nielsen: But there were always people coming and going for, I don't know, how ever many hours it was set up on the specific afternoon they- they had it set up. So I'm- I'm- I always thought that President Myers, instead of him traveling around to various book dealers, he got the book dealers to come.

Miner: [laughs] (unsure, 5:40??)

Nielsen: So he got to peruse them without having to leave campus.

Miner: That's interesting.

Nielsen: And usually- yeah, I had seen several of the dealers were consistent from year to year-

Miner: Yeah.

Nielsen: -pretty much. I don't know how they did there, but I know I found several items that I was interested in. They had- they didn't cater to his specific- and I know he was interested in- in the 1700s. But there was a wide collection for everybody. It just was not limited to that time period.

Miner: Hmm.

Nielsen: So you could, depending on what you were interested in, you could probably find something there. And they always had decent material. It wasn't like a flea market. It was really good quality book items if you were looking them to add to your collection. They were really, really good, so-

Miner: Well, you said earlier that you thought- before we started recording, you thought that he was a bargain hunter. So I mean, this is the kind of event thought that would attract people with a range of-

Nielsen: Yes, it was.

Miner:-collecting capabilities, I guess?

Nielsen: You had everything from the- I...I don't know. The things I saw from the table were from five dollars to- some of the Wodehouse books they brought were seventy-five dollars and more.

Miner: Ooo.

Nielsen: There was- to me, that's the range of my budget. [laughs]

Miner: Sure, something for- something for everybody.

Nielsen: Right. So as for his budget and I know that he could probably go the whole range of what was cost-wise. But I know from visiting him he- he was always trying to find a- he was looking for a bargain.

Miner: Sure. That's great. Well, one of the things that's interesting is you mentioned that- that he was a collector of eighteenth century. But his collection had a range of- of dates, from- and he had one (unsure, 7:42??) from 15- or, yeah, 1496, I believe, and on through the twentieth century. So when I- I read about him, that he had this interest, this collecting focus, but I know he had a lot of other things. That's one of the things I'm curious about in this project is- is what were his collecting parameters? You have a very defined collecting parameter-

Nielsen: Yeah.

Miner: -for your own personal tastes, and so, I don't know.

Nielsen: For somebody that was not on campus or knew him, you know, on really a one to one basis, it always came out that he was collecting music.

Miner: Music, okay.

Nielsen: And that was the one thing that I- I know he was really interested in. What kind of books he had, I- I didn't really-

Miner: Sure.

Nielsen: -know that, but I knew he had the- he was really interested in whatever kind of music- music- sheet music that he could get for various instruments.

Miner: Do you know how you found that out or how you came to be aware of that?

Nielsen: How did I know that? You know, we are friends with Steve and Sue Seibring, as I know we've talked to him- Steve I had talked about. [Miner laughs] And if- I'm sure he probably mentioned something about how that- his collection was- was going.

Miner: Hmm. Somebody else I should talk to then.

Nielsen: Yeah. You should talk to Steve because his office was right down the hall from Minor, and I remember one time I was up- for whatever reason, I was talking to Steve about something. I was probably just stopped in to say hi. And this article in *Biblio* about Minor Myers had come out and so the next thing I know, we're down in the president's office. He had made copies of this article to hand out to visitors.

Miner: Oh! [laughs]

Nielsen: And they- they had a whole stack of them-

Miner: Hmm.

Nielsen: -available so I said I already got the...[both laugh]...the magazine. But it just tickled me that he had all these copies of this article made up so if anyone was interested-

Miner: Sure.

Nielsen: -they could get a copy of that-

Miner: Yeah. Yeah.

Nielsen: -article.

Miner: Huh.

Nielsen: So-

Miner: Well, is there anything...else that you can think of that can help us? I mean, what do you think he would think of the fact that the university auctioned his collection?

Nielsen: To me, the bargain hunter that he was and that I am also, I- I think he would appreciate what the library did.

Miner: Okay.

Nielsen: I- I think he would like to see these items go back out onto market for other collectors to have that same thrill that he and I got from finding, “Wow, look at this!” I- you know, “This is a good deal!” So yeah, I think he would have been happy with that and- and some you kept, some returned to the market for other collectors. Yeah, I think he’d be very pleased with that part of it.

Miner: That’s great, ‘cause I know some collectors do that very thing. They acquire a collection and then they sell it-

Nielsen: Right.

Miner: -and then they acquire again because they enjoy that- I assuming they enjoy that aspect of collecting. And some people collect to keep, and- and what I saw from my very limited point of view was a massive amount of things that were kept, and I- so the other thing that I’m curious about is if he ever did that. Did he have that sort of revolving collection where he would disperse things (unsure, 11:14??)

Nielsen: I’ve never heard of him getting rid of anything.

Miner: Okay. [laughs]

Nielsen: But I- I- I just assume what he took in he kept.

Miner: Okay.

Nielsen: That’s an assumption on my part.

Miner: Sure. Yeah. Well, it’s one of the things- you know, one of the questions that I had here. Is there anything else we should know him that you can- that you can think or-

Nielsen: No, I just- he was just a really unique individual that I- I loved to talk with and visit with because he was, to me, the prototype of a university president. [laughs]

Miner: How so?

Nielsen: I don't know, just the- just the way- his look. I mean, to me you could just pick him out of a crowd that he would be a university president...[Miner laughs]...from just looking at him. And he could- but he was friendly, he could talk to you, and- but I know he was, from other people I've talked to, he could have twenty different ideas going at one time-

Miner: Yeah.

Nielsen: -remember them two or three months later and wanted to know a progress report.

Miner: Checking back on them.

Nielsen: Yes.

Miner: I have heard that too. That's interesting.

Nielsen: So no, he- he was- he was just- I'm glad that I had the opportunity to visit and interact with him.

Miner: Great. Well, is there anyone else you think I should be talking to in this project? You mentioned Steve Seibring. Are there other people you know in the community who would have been in on these- on these sales or-

Nielsen: Not in on the book sales, 'cause I don't think- I- I- just don't- no, 'cause I never saw anybody there that I knew, and it was through Wesleyan's publication or advertising that I- although there were a lot of people that I'm sure went, but not people I was personally aware of.

Miner: Did you go to the auction? I forgot, I should have you that. [laughs]

Nielsen: I did not go to the auction.

Miner: Okay.

Nielsen: I wish- I wish I had, but I- for whatever reason, I didn't- I probably felt everything was out of my price range or...[Miner laughs]...out of my interest-

Miner: Sure. Yeah.

Nielsen: -because he was completely different from- from what I wanted-

Miner: Yeah.

Nielsen: -to collect.

Miner: Alright.

Nielsen: And that's all I know about Minor.

Miner: Okay, well thank you so much for coming by and talking.

Nielsen: Thank you.