Portrait of a Collector:
A View from the Shelves of Minor Myers, jr.

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Introduction
The purpose of this essay is to provide an analysis of the books that President Minor Myers, jr. collected and that were subsequently transferred to Illinois Wesleyan University (IWU) after Myers’ death. For reasons that will be discussed below, keeping Myers’ collection in its entirety at IWU was not practical or desirable. Most of the collection was dispersed at auction and a brief discussion of that event and of the decisions about what to retain conclude this work.

At the time of his death, Myers’ CV was made available on the University’s commemoration Web pages.1 Among his accomplishments and associations he listed:

Collections: Books, especially Eighteenth century books (significant groupings in political philosophy, music, gardening, cookery), decorative arts, nineteenth century cookery. Musical instruments of the eighteenth century. College related materials, though my earlier group of 11,000 items once in the American Antiquarian Society is now part of the Illinois Wesleyan University Library.2

That he was a lifelong and earnest bibliophile is stated quite simply in his CV, but it is most evident in the growth of his personal collection during his tenure as IWU’s president. A local news story, printed in July 1989, his first month on campus, says that he possesses “3,000 titles from the [18th century]….”3 On his death 14 years later, the total number of books and ephemera the University acquired from his collection was nearly 12,000.4

Even though most of his books are no longer at IWU, it is still possible to appreciate the breadth of Myers’ book collecting interests due to the cataloging project undertaken by the author after the University acquired the collection. Appended to this work are a list of the titles selected for retention in Special Collections at The Ames Library, the original auction catalog; and a prices realized list for the same auction material, but with a complete list of titles and condition notes.

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2 The donation Myers mentioned is of publications that were issued serially like course catalogs, alumni profiles, and financial reports. After the author processed this collection during 2002-2003, it was reduced to a little over 9,500 due to problems with condition like mold and moisture damage. In 2016, this collection was selected for withdrawal from Tate Archives & Special Collections, The Ames Library, Illinois Wesleyan University.
3 Susan Marquardt, “President Brings Humor, Experience to Wesleyan Job.” Pantagraph (Bloomington), July 18, 1989, A2.
4 Handwritten notes Myers made towards the end of his life include a statement that he spent $115,000 on “rare books many bought in [sic] past 5-7 years.” Record Group 2-12/6/10 (folder 4 of 7) Unprocessed Research Notes. Tate Archives & Special Collections, Illinois Wesleyan University, Bloomington, Illinois.

Note: For the remainder of this paper, the repository location for the “Record Group” citations will not be repeated: all are held in the same repository at IWU.
grouped by auction lot.\textsuperscript{5} Photographs of the collection as it existed at the time of auction are also available here. Unfortunately, photographs of Myers’ collection while it was in his IWU home do not appear to exist. Although many people recall seeing books on the shelves in the President’s House, and some shelves were reportedly stacked three-books deep, no one interviewed for this project took a photograph of this arrangement.\textsuperscript{6} Many formal portraiture photographs taken of Myers during his tenure as IWU’s president include books, often carefully displayed, nearby. One informal photograph from Connecticut College’s archives may be the closest we can come to seeing how Myers kept his books for his own use.\textsuperscript{7}

**Background on the acquisition**

Following Myers’ death, his wife Ellen asked the University to purchase his book collection and the Board of Trustees agreed to do so.\textsuperscript{8} Subsequently almost 12,000 items were transferred into the library’s custody. At that time, the author was in a temporary position at IWU and the University Librarian charged her, under the supervision of the University Archivist, with describing and organizing this material. Correspondence between the University Librarian and the Associate Provost indicate that, after the organization and analysis of the collection was complete, the library made recommendations for retaining part of the collection and outlined three dispersal options: consigning it to an auction house, selling directly to individual dealers, or hosting a local auction. The library’s preference in this report\textsuperscript{9} was for hiring a local auctioneer to sell the collection by lots and relieving library personnel from further involvement in that event. Ultimately, the Board approved the latter option but the author remained involved and assisted the auctioneer in conducting these activities in the fall of 2005.

Questions about whether or not the collection that was transferred to the University was all that Myers owned arose soon after the beginning of the inventory project.\textsuperscript{10} During a 2016 interview with Mrs. Myers, she stated that she believed her husband’s collection held more than double the number of volumes that were transferred to the University but she also states she has no knowledge of what might have happened to such a large number of items.\textsuperscript{11} The fate of some books people recall seeing and several that were appraised prior to transfer have not been

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\textsuperscript{5} See Appendices B-D, respectively.
\textsuperscript{7} See Appendix A.
\textsuperscript{8} The archives holds no documentary evidence of this agreement and no Board member from that era participated in this project. However, Provost McNew’s letter to the faculty confirms how the purchase happened and that most of the collection would be sold at auction. Janet McNew, memo to “Faculty: Auction of Myers Books,” July 27, 2005. Record Group 2-12/7/5: Minor Myers, jr. Collection Book Auction: Sept. 17, 2005.
\textsuperscript{9} No interviewees or documentation indicate that the University had an interest in acquiring anything other than books. Although many interviewees commented on their encounters with Myers and his other types collections, books are the focus of this essay. After editing, all recordings will be available from the University Archives’ Oral History website at [http://digitalcommons.iwu.edu/oralhistory](http://digitalcommons.iwu.edu/oralhistory).
\textsuperscript{10} Interviewee Sue Anderson states that she saw a written agreement with the Board that allowed the family to retain all of Myers’ Early Music collection and to choose from other titles. Sue Anderson, interviewed by the author, February 17, 2016. Roger Schnaitter likewise believes there was some agreement that was more broadly interpreted by the family than intended. Roger Schnaitter, interviewed by the author, April 6, 2016.
\textsuperscript{11} Ellen Myers, interviewed by the author, March 12, 2016.
discovered during this investigation. Mrs. Myers received an appraisal on just over 100 titles in October 2003 and by the end of the catalog creation in 2005 only 17 titles were unaccounted for. In addition to this appraisal, the “rosters” Myers created and the card catalog he kept (described below) offer evidence that a few hundred more were not transferred to the University, but it does not seem possible that another 11,000 titles were part of Myers’ holdings in 2003.

To a person, everyone interviewed for this project believes Myers was not a typical collector-seller; that is, one who might buy for investment or a particular interest and then sell off portions of these accumulations. However, he was known to loan books to people and he did donate portions of his collections. Based on The Ames Library’s donor records, the largest amounts of books transferred from his personal holdings to the library during his lifetime numbered in the hundreds, not the thousands. But Myers never wrote about his own collecting practices and the lists of titles that he created may be incomplete. It is difficult to say at this point if anything was sold, donated or loaned during Myers’ lifetime and just not removed from the lists available; or to explain what may have happened to an unknown, undocumented portion of the remainder of his collection. The author could also have misinterpreted the lists’ significance with relation to his collection as a whole but ultimately can confirm only that a relative handful remain unaccounted for.

Collection analysis

For a person with as many interests as President Myers had, a definitive assessment of the subject areas he collected may not be possible. All who speak of him today invariably use the phrase Renaissance Man or the word polymath to describe him. With the broad spectrum of knowledge that characterizes a polymath, it is not surprising that the bulk of Myers’ collection included almost every topic imaginable. In Myers own words, being a polymath meant “to achieve distinction and joy distinction in more than one field.” The books and articles that Myers published and planned to publish offer support to anyone looking for a relationship between books he collected and the written results of his “distinctions,” but his collection was more varied than his publication list alone accounts for.

Due to an initial idea of re-selling parts of the collection to specific dealers, the author aggregated subject areas derived from the booksellers’ specialties as they were listed in the Antiquarian Booksellers’ Association of American 2004 Membership Directory. Looking at the

13 Requests for interviews with the appraiser, Carol Struck, and her husband Steve, who auctioned the collection, went unanswered. They were once owners of About Books, a bookshop Myers frequented.
14 The author wrote an article, currently undergoing peer-review, describing the complexity of Myers’ relationship with the libraries at IWU.
numbers of books he collected compared to the different specialties listed in Table 1 provides an insight into other areas of distinction he may have been seeking.\footnote{A more detailed breakdown of these topics is included in Record Group 2-12/7/5: Minor Myers, Jr. Collection Book Auction: Sept. 17, 2005.}

Table 1: Subjects

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Title count range</th>
<th>Specialties</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1000-1553</td>
<td>Recipes, History (Places/Cultures), Biographies/Autobiographies/ Letters/Works</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>500-1000</td>
<td>Americana/American History, Numismatics/Philately, Japanese &amp; Chinese Language &amp; Culture, Literature, Local History, Philosophy/Religion, Railroads</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>100-500</td>
<td>Art &amp; Architecture, Atlases/Maps, Books about Books, College &amp; University Publications, Collectibles, Domestic Sciences/Conduct of Life, Education, Food (not recipes), Gardening, Music, Languages (not specified), Politics/Political Thought, Sciences</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&lt;100</td>
<td>[numerous]</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As mentioned above, President Myers characterized his interests as any topic in the 18th century. The dates in the collection IWU acquired, however, span 1496-2003. Table 2 contains a title count compared to the century of publication for these volumes. Nearly half of this material was published in the 20th century with most of that being from the latter half, so it is clear that Myers collected well outside his stated time period of interest.

Table 2: Analysis of titles per century

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Century</th>
<th>Title count</th>
<th>Percentage (of 11911 titles cataloged)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>21st (2000-2003)</td>
<td>104</td>
<td>.87</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20th</td>
<td>5733</td>
<td>48.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(1950-1999 = 3716; 1900-1949 = 2071)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19th</td>
<td>2443</td>
<td>.20.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18th</td>
<td>2399</td>
<td>.20.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17th</td>
<td>271</td>
<td>.2.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16th</td>
<td>83</td>
<td>.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15th</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>.008</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Titles with no publication date</td>
<td>866</td>
<td>.7.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dates that could not be transliterated</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>.09</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

So-called “rosters” Myers created contain what may be the best indication of his collecting interests. These lists were discovered in print among his personal papers and were also recovered from floppy disks. Only the three containing lists of books are discussed here.\footnote{Titles of other rosters available are Country House Notes, Early Musical Instruments, Music Theatre in Chicago, Gems Series, and Victor Gems Series. Record Group 2-12/6/4: Personal Collections.} The first contains no indicator of its compilation date. The second and third include “last update” dates of 2001 and 1999, respectively. And so, unless Myers failed to change the dates, these are almost certainly not a complete list of his collections during the later years of his life.
• Early Garden Books (spanning the 18th-20th centuries; including almanacs and horticulture),
• Early Books on Food (which he collected “Together with books on social usage proper language, and beauty”), and
• Early Music (17th-18th centuries; primarily consisting of scores, not books about music, listed under “Catalogues of Publishers”).

An additional examination of the publication dates for the food and gardening books shows that only 4% of the former and 7.6% of the latter fall into the 18th century range for publication dates. As with the larger collection, these groups do not fall neatly into place with Myers’ stated collecting objectives. Many of the titles in the music list do not have dates associated with them; however, a majority of the ones that do are from the 18th century. Looking solely at this collecting criterion, music seemed to be his primary “joy distinction.”

An analysis of titles in the first two rosters, comparing them to the items transferred to the University, reveals that 30% of the books on food and .03% of the gardening books were not present in his collection at the time of transfer. Some of the entries in the food list contain notes about loans Myers made, but not all titles that are missing have that kind of note.

One further record Myers created is still undergoing analysis. His personal research collections contained a handwritten card catalog of titles, and almost all of these include research notes on the books’ significance and availability compared to published bibliographies. An examination of the first 250 entries reveals that almost all of the titles were included in the collection transferred to IWU, so this level of evidence may also show that IWU received most of what Myers owned. Nevertheless, an addendum reporting on the outcome of that work will be added after these notes are transcribed and comparisons completed.

Myers’ son Minor III does not recall Myers cataloging his collections at all but these lists confirm that he did attempt at least a partial catalog, and it is tempting to imagine that the rosters offer an indication of what Myers valued simply because he took the time to create them.

An account of the auction and books retained

In 1945, Lawrence C. Wroth, Librarian of Brown University’s John Carter Brown Library considered the possible ends to collections built by avid book collectors in an article titled “The Chief End of Book Madness.” He acknowledges that many collections are sold at auction and that collectors are told the “decision to sell will bring great joy to the world of bookmen.”20 His purpose in stating this is to contrast those collectors with ones who build libraries with comprehensive collections of particular interests. Wroth was then head of a library that had its start as just such a personal collection and he was speaking at the opening of an exhibition for

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19 Minor Myers III, interviewed by the author, March 12, 2016.
another donor-collector, so it is not surprising that he also passes judgment on what kinds of collections should be brought to auction. In his view, “Most collections that come to the auction room are destined to the apprais room from the beginning. They are aggregations of books rather than collections, the work of men to whom collecting has been a hobby rather than a passion.”

Wroth differentiates between “normal collectors” and those who realize that

this gentle and always respectable pursuit suddenly, or gradually, as the case may be, has become the dominating force in life. Collecting engrosses him more and more, book madness seizes him, he becomes fou, he finds that he is going to his office or his factory for quiet relaxation and to his fireside for the stern business of life. He buys and buys again, filling out old subjects, opening new fields, exhausting himself and straining his resources. One day he stands off and takes stock of what he has done. He realizes that through the demon which possesses him a new potentiality of influence has been born into the world. Happy is he if in this state of awareness he can plan to make permanent the new force he has created.

According to the people who offered reflections on his book collecting, the arc of Myers’ collecting life fits this description. An announcement regarding the auction by Provost and Dean of the Faculty Janet McNew also provides an insight that supports application of Wroth’s attributions to Myers:

In one of my last conversations with him, President Minor Myers reflected ruefully on his collecting habit. He was, he said, still in the amassing stage. He had hoped to spend a long, delightful retirement filling in gaps in some areas, culling others, and generally organizing this life’s work into what he hoped would become one of the best private book and music collections in the country and a substantial inheritance for his sons.

Myers left only a little evidence that he ever stopped to take stock of his holdings, as Wroth suggested and McNew confirms, but at the end of his life there was no plan in place for their dispersal. Thus far only one clue from Myers himself has been recovered: this is in the form of handwritten notes he made during the final weeks of his life that indicate he was exploring dispersal possibilities for different parts of his collections. The name and phone number of Chicago book dealer Tom Joyce is included with these notes, but it is not known if all the suggestions in Myers’ notes were Joyce’s or even if Myers followed the advice. Requests for interviews with Joyce for this project went unanswered, but the notes Myers made include titles for a few prominent items, and even their locations in his home, along with explicit statements of interest in the collection’s resale value.

21 Ibid.
22 Ibid., 72.
25 Specific titles mentioned in these handwritten notes include a 1584 Dante, 1702 Cotton Mather Magnalia Christie [unnumbered p.1], Whole Book of Psalms [1787 ed. with fore-edge painting] and 1768 Hermit [p. 6], a 1632 ed. of
Minutes for November 12, 2003 Executive Committee of the Board of Trustees show the group considering two courses of action. In an early 2005 note to Associate Provost Roger Schnaitter, Acting President McNew reports on the purchase from Myers’ estate and that “[t]he books would be inventoried and processed for either addition to the library collection or future sale.” The library had no funding to catalog such a quantity of material, and most of the collection did not support IWU’s curriculum. Ultimately, the University Librarian and the Archivist chose both of the options when they successfully argued for time and funding to undertake a collection analysis. With this approach, retaining appropriate portions of the collection became possible.

Approximately halfway through the evaluation process, the Provost expressed the opinion that the Board might be surprised that anything but the complete collection would be retained. At some undocumented point, the Board’s thinking shifted and the library’s plan was announced. Just five months later, in the July 2005 memo to the faculty mentioned above, the Provost stated,

Our purpose is to raise funds to come as close as possible to replacing the purchase price of the collection in our endowment. With so large a collection, the auctioneers will organize the collection in lots, and we expect that most of the collection will be acquired by the many dealers and collectors attracted to the sale.

McNew also mentions in this memo that it took 18 months to organize the collection. That number excludes three months taken to estimate the amount of time and money needed to organize the collection and catalog each book. Speed in accomplishing the collection’s disposition was necessary because of the work location: Sheean Library was the only campus location large enough to house the processing project and it was designated for demolition that year. Physical Plant staff constructed a plastic-walled, free-standing room on the entry level of the long-unused library that made it possible to lessen fluctuations in humidity; the HVAC system was not functioning, so it was not possible to regulate the temperature.

The author’s work log shows 21 months of part time work recorded overall. Half of a typical week was split between this work and the author’s previously assigned duties including other special collections projects, departmental liaison responsibilities, and the Reference Desk.

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26 Contained in the meeting packet for December 10, 2003. Record Group 1-3/2/16: Executive Committee Minutes and Reports.
30 Photographs of the space are available in Appendix A. On the day of the auction, staff removed the plastic covering the temporary walls for ease of access. For many unrelated reasons, Sheean was not demolished until 2011.
In the end, reports compiled for University administrators show over 12,000 items cataloged and over 1,300 selected for retention by the library. Some items included in the database count were not itemized in the auction catalog.\(^{31}\) There were two primary reasons for this: in the case of languages that could not be transliterated for title-level listing and for several serial runs (magazines or sales catalogs) in varying quantities per title. This kind of material was grouped into small lots for the sale with more general descriptions such as “3 boxes of older Orientalia,” and “Mixed (college & alumni) volumes [not counted].” One substantive section containing Americana was originally designated for retention; it was ultimately auctioned and there is no known record on how that decision was reversed.

On the day of the auction, several library personnel provided assistance by monitoring attendees as they previewed the lots in the book stacks at the auction site. Business Office staff registered buyers and managed all financial transactions. A total of 100 people registered as bidders and the entire collection was sold in five hours with a total amount realized, after expenses, of over $117,000.

The library’s retention selections, as announced, were based on the final recommendations submitted to the Provost by the University Librarian. The Provost’s memo describes the areas that the library chose to retain as follows: “Book Arts, Collectors, History, and Reference, including a group of early printed books the oldest of which is dated 1496 and falls into the incunabula period of printing history; Drama, with an emphasis on the 18th century; and Social Life and Customs, mostly from the 18-19th centuries.”\(^{32}\)

In Special Collections, accessioned titles exist in the following sub-collection areas: Books about Books (Myers’ Reference collection), Book Arts (examples of book construction and design elements across subject areas), Conduct of Life (volumes related to the Domestic Sciences and to moral instructions for youth), the unspecified section, Drama, Local History, and Mysteries. Only the latter three areas were already collecting foci for Special Collections. Additional books that had been gifts to Myers were also transferred to the library for further evaluation because of the letters and notes to Myers that they contained.

After 24 boxes were transferred to the library, University Archivist Anke Voss further determined that the normal criteria for including the books in Special Collections would apply: specific collecting areas, age, or rarity would take precedence over accessioning en masse. Titles that fell outside those criteria were designated for the library’s circulating collection.

It is important to note that items sent to the library’s circulating collection became subject to the library’s weeding policies and so may not be retained over time. Materials sent to Special Collections have not been subjected to deaccessioning activities since then but even so, due to the discrepancies in cataloging fewer than 665 items (out of 777 expected, per the box transfer list) can be found in a catalog search for the notes that signify the books’ provenance: “Minor Myers, jr. Personal Collection.” Of those, 631 are in Special Collections.

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\(^{31}\) A copy of the auction catalog is appended to this work and available in print in Record Group 2-12/7-5: Minor Myers, jr. Collection Book Auction: Sept. 17, 2005.

The proposed plan was to maintain *intellectual control*\(^{33}\) over Myers’ collection, regardless of making the items available in circulating or non-circulating parts of The Ames Library, by including notes in the cataloging record that would make subsequent searches for Myers’ material possible. Due to staffing limitations, cataloging took several years. In the intervening time, the decisions about cataloging notes changed and so there is now no way to search current holdings directly and find every title retained in one set of search results. Therefore, a title list of items identified for retention is appended to this article.\(^{34}\)

**Conclusion**

Typically, librarians encounter large collection transfers through a relationship with a donor. Great libraries are often built, stocked and endowed after collection and careful cultivation by people who ultimately turn over their collections to an institution.\(^{35}\) Even with Myers’ sudden illness, he would have been able to designate all or part of his personal collections as a gift to the University but he did not. When asked about the possibility that Myers may have wished to donate some of his holdings to IWU, his wife Ellen stated that he left no instructions regarding the dispersal of his collections at all.\(^{36}\) The administrators and librarians involved in the collection’s disposition made choices based on the institution’s needs, potential for historical interest, and established selection criteria.

This analysis and accompanying records make a long-term understanding of Myers’ book collecting activities possible. Fellow bibliophiles can benefit from a smaller but still significant portion of his collection in The Ames Library. The author’s related companion essay examines Myers as a collector through the perspectives of literature on collectors, the people who interacted with him and his books, and interviews Myers gave on the subject.

**Acknowledgements:** The Sabbatical Leave Program at Illinois Wesleyan University made it possible for the author to pursue her curiosity about this president’s persistent influence on The Ames Library’s collections. The author is grateful to all of the people who shared their time and memories about President Myers for this project and, especially, to University Librarian Karen Schmidt who provided the travel funding needed to conduct interviews in Connecticut. Professor Emeritus Don Krummel, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, encouraged these explorations, read an early draft and offered valuable insights into Myers’ place among the ranks of bookmen.


\(^{34}\) See Appendix B.

\(^{35}\) Myers himself wrote about how George S. Palmer, benefactor for Connecticut College’s Palmer Library, funded its construction from sale of his furniture collection and then donated books. See also a broad selection of similar cases by Nicholas A. Basbanes, “Instant Ivy,” *Patience and Fortitude* (New York, Harper Collins, 2001), 312-54. Citations for Myers’ and others’ articles on collector-donors are listed in the bibliography (see Bolze, Kennedy, Leab, MacLeod, Paulus).

\(^{36}\) Ellen Myers, March 12, 2016.
Bibliography


List of Appendices

Appendix A: Photographs – a word document containing five embedded photographs.

The following appendices are available as one complete PDF at https://works.bepress.com/meg_miner/27/

Appendix B: Titles accessioned to The Ames Library – this PDF contains 44 pages. Contact the author for an Excel version.

Appendix C: The 2005 auction catalog – this document is only available as a PDF and contains 17 pages. A limited number of printed auction catalogs are still available; to acquire one, contact the author.

Appendix D: The prices realized catalog – this PDF contains 488 pages and includes full bibliographic details recorded during the collection processing project of 2004-2005. Contact the author for an Excel version.
Appendix A

Minor Myers, jr. in his Connecticut College office, ca. mid-1970.
(Courtesy Linda Lear Center for Special Collections and Archives, Connecticut College.)
Temporary shelving in Sheean Library processing area, enclosed by Physical Plant for better humidity control. Shelving area opened on auction day, September 17, 2005.
Selected lots removed from shelving

Sheean Library processing and auction space photos taken by Meg Miner