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John Winchell: Grad Student to Archives Curator

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Archives Curator John Winchell

Thursday, August 25 at 2:25 PM

At the Zhang Legacy Collections Center

Cassie: Okay, today is Thursday, August 25 at about 2:25 PM. This is Cassie Kotrch interviewing John Winchell. And could you spell your last name?

John: Yes, my last name is W-I-N-C-H-E-L-L.

Cassie: Awesome, and you were a grad student at WMU, is that correct?

John: Yes, I arrived on campus in the fall of 1986, and I graduated in 1989 with a masters in history.

Cassie: So was 1986, was that your first time stepping onto campus at WMU?

John: No, it wasn't, I had visited friends when I was an undergraduate and stayed on campus to kinda hang out with friends. And probably the thing I remember most about that is friends insisting that they wanted to take me to Bilbo's and get pizza.

And so one of my first memories of, kind of, Kalamazoo is going to Bilbo's and having deep dish whole wheat pizza.

Cassie: Wow, so what was your first memory of East Campus?

John: My first memory of East Campus was walking from main campus up the hill to East Campus on a Friday afternoon.

I had a book on a reading list for a class in the history department that I had to get from the business library. And so, it was a business history class or book. And I remember going into North Hall and working my way up the stairs to where the business library reading room was.

And off that reading room, you could enter the stacks. And the stacks really surprised me because, since the building had been built in the 1920s, in a three story building, the stack area was essentially



six levels, but it was a metal frame within the kind of shell of the building and when you walked on the catwalks, you could actually look down and see through the flooring and around the edges of the stacks. And so it was very different. I came to find out later that that was not unusual because it maximized shelving in a building of that type.

But it also meant that when you went past the light fixtures, you would need to, you kind of duck down a little bit because they were so low. But that's my first memory of, kind of being on East Campus, was checking out a book and then taking it back to my apartment because I had to read it for a reading list.

Cassie: And that was North Hall, which is no longer there now, obviously.

John: Right.

Cassie: Then, so after your undergrad, you went to grad school here, and then you actually started working here. Was that right after grad school, or how did that work out?

John: Well, when I finished my master's degree, I was recently married, my wife had a job with the Battle Creek Enquirer, so I was looking for something in the area.

And when I was job hunting, a position for a temporary night supervisor at Waldo Library came open, and somebody asked me if I wanted to do that while I was job hunting. And working nights, 3 to midnight, meant that I'd have the days free to be sending out resumes and doing things.

And one thing kind of led to the other, and eventually I ended up with a full time job at the education library. And so my first permanent job was December 1990.

Cassie: And then you just stayed on but moved positions after that, right?

John: Yeah, well, I spent ten years as the night supervisor at the education library. And a job position came open for an Archives Curator, and I hadn't thought too much about it. And a friend kinda said, "Well, hey, but that would really be degree appropriate for you and it'd be days." And so I thought, "Okay, this probably makes too much sense not to apply for it."

So, fall of 2000, I applied and interviewed with Sharon Carlson, who was the Director of the Archives at the time, and was hired for that position. And that meant that I would be working in East Hall.

Cassie: And how long were you working out of East Hall? How would you summarize that experience working in East Hall at that time?

John: It was a real mixed blessing in some ways. I loved the historic feel of the building. And at that point, in 2000, East Campus was still being kind of lightly used. So, the building we were in, we were in the north end of East Hall in the women's gymnasium.

That was our reading room, storage was in the basement, where there had been locker rooms and a swimming pool. There had been a lot of deferred maintenance on the building.

The first summer I spent there, we did not have air conditioning, we had fans. And I can remember on a particularly hot day realizing that, It had been so warm that I kind of sat at my desk for a few minutes and not really done anything because it was just the heat.

And realizing like, okay, we had a break room that had a window air conditioning unit in it. And I came to realize, I've got to drink plenty of water, and also it's good to probably take short breaks and just get in the air condition for a little while before going back out to your desk.

A year later, President Floyd signed off on putting window air conditioning units around all of the windows of the gym. And after that, that wasn't as effective as central air would have been, but it meant that the summers were much easier to take. But one of the things that was true is while we were in that building, we were always trying to find ways to kind of have the best possible scenario with our staff, but more importantly for all of us as archivists, our materials.

And so, we would often do things. The basement storage, we had standalone dehumidifier units that we would run and window air conditioning units. And we made sure that anything stored in the basement was on pallets that was up off the floor if it wasn't on shelving. We sometimes used painter's plastic to drape over things, because it was a 1904 building with steam pipe heating.

So, there were active steam pipes and water pipes all through the area, and it was in a basement. So, possibilities of water in areas that we didn't want it to be were pretty high, and happened on occasions.

Cassie: And had the pool been filled in in the basement then?

John: Yes, they had filled it in and then put a layer of concrete over the top so that the main stack area in the basement was somewhat uneven. You could kinda tell where the sides of the pool had been, but it was relatively flat and you could put traditional shelving on it.

Cassie: Okay, and then where your desks were, that would have been in the old gymnasium, right?

John: Yes.

Cassie: Had that been redone at all or was it like you were really in an old gym?

John: Well, we really were in an old gym. And one of the things that sometimes amuse the students that work for us is, climbing ropes were still hanging from the rafters, and gym classes for several generations, it was not unusual in a gym class to climb ropes. Well, you could still go up on the running track that went around the top of the gym, and there was a place where you could crank down the ropes.

And the last few years we were in the gym, our students would decorate for the holidays and put lights around the railing of the track and often would hang some tinsel and some things from the ropes just as a getting in kinda holiday cheer.

Cassie: Oh that's cool, wow. So, do you remember anything else about the other buildings connected to the old gym then around that time?

John: Yes, most of the rest of East Hall at the time was being used by the School of Art. And so, there were faculty and graduate students that would have studios in old classrooms, and the south end of the building where the training school had been, there was a rotunda that was used for exhibits.

So, often, by every week, pretty much, you could go and see a new installation in the rotunda, and you would find students that had put up their work, and that was always kinda one of the benefits of being there at the time. Often at the end of the week, during lunch or the break time in the afternoon, I would walk down and take a look at the student exhibits, and that was always intriguing to see what they would have.

North Hall at the time, we had overflow storage there, so we were in and out of that building on a regular basis. West Hall was fairly quiet, but the Old Health and Administration Building, that was still being used by the Speech Pathology department. And when the College of Health and Human Services was built, they moved out of that building to the new CHHS.

But until that time, and that would have been mid 2000s, they had been in that building for most of the time that we were there.

Cassie: During the time that you were working there, what was the university's relationship with East Campus like? And what was the town and gown relationship like at that time?

John: I think for the university, there was a long stretch where I don't think East Campus was a priority. And so, there was always kind of a low level kind of searching and questioning as to what we're going to do with this space in these buildings.

And I know in 2010, when the Higher Learning Commission came through to accredit, one of the things that they mentioned in their report was the fact that the archives was really in a substandard situation physically, the building itself. And I think, at that point, the university had been looking at solutions, and it was not long after that, 2013, that our new building that the Archives and Regional History Collections are housed in now was completed and we were able to move into.

And at that point, the central portion, the original portion of East Hall, was renovated and is now known as Heritage Hall. But the other three buildings on the Old Quad and the North and South wings of East Hall were all raised. And fully understanding the cost of what renovation would have taken, I'm glad that they were able to renovate the original portion of Heritage Hall.

But I also have kind of a bit of melancholy for those other buildings that I had worked in and around for 13 years. And that I have a family legacy. My grandmother attended Western when it was Western State Normal School, along with two of her siblings, my mother and my aunt attended Western during the 1940s, during the war years.

And so, I had heard stories. My mother was perpetually five minutes late for almost anything in her life. She had a job at the library in North Hall. And I remember her telling, I asked her once about the trolley. And I was like, "Would you drive the trolley very often?"

And she said, "Well, sometimes, yes, but sometimes if I was late, I was sprinting up the steps past the trolley to get to North Hall to try to be on time."

Cassie: Wow!

John: So, when I was working there, there were echoes of family history.

Cassie: Yeah, and to work at a library at Western when your mom also worked at a library at Western, how did that feel?

John: Well, she had done that as an undergraduate student. But yeah, there seemed to be a little bit of okay, "echoes from the past".

Cassie: So what do you remember about the town and gown relationship at that time? And what was the reaction to losing so many of the buildings in 2013?

John: Disappointment, the Friends of Historic East Campus, I think it really wanted all the buildings to be preserved. And I think that group was made up of emeriti, alumni, but also people from the historical community in Kalamazoo that valued the history of it. And so I do think there was disappointment there and a certain level of frustration.

And I think there's still some of that that's felt now, even while acknowledging that the Heritage Hall has been beautifully renovated.

Cassie: During your time as a grad student here at Western, did you spend much time on East campus at all, or any time at all at East campus?

John: Not a lot. The trip up to the business library was probably the extent of it during my grad student years. As a graduate student, I lived pretty much all of my academic life in Friedman and Dunbar Halls and Waldo Library. And I had a year that I lived on campus in the Elwood Apartments, so I could form a small triangle from my apartment to Friedman/Dunbar to Waldo Library. The second year I was here, I was living in a house off campus, so that changed a little bit. But still those three buildings, that was my kind of Western world.

Cassie: So that during the time that you were working here then and on East campus, what did a typical day look like?

John: As a grad student, I was often working mornings either as an assistant or in Waldo library. I spent some time working as a grad student in the bindery at Waldo library. And I often set it up so that I worked mornings and I would spend the afternoons in the library doing whatever reading, researching I needed, evenings in class.

Once I graduated and was working full time, then the dynamic changed some and I worked nights for 10 years from 3 to midnight. And that was a little different kind of situation. And because of where I worked in Sangren Hall, often I would go to lunch from 6 to 7 and when I would come back at seven, the rest of the full time staff would head home and it would be myself and a couple of students and whatever students were coming in to ask questions or find resources. And so I actually enjoyed that because there were times where, the students would come in, you kind of get to know particularly some of the non-traditional students who were coming back for a masters in education would come in.

And you'd have a certain group of people that would come in after class and ask you to help them with whatever they needed. So I had a group of regulars that seemed like that would kind of gradually change as people finished their degrees.

Cassie: Right. So, what did the typical day look like then when you were working on East Campus at East Hall?

John: Usually in the door, Sharon Carlson and I both typically were in the door at 7:45. It's to open up at 8:00.

Cassie: So you didn't share your mom's propensity of being five minutes late.

John: Not particularly, no. No, I have my dad's "15 minutes early is on time", which was one of those things that was of frustration to him when they were married.

They loved each other very much, but that was one thing that my dad would be kind of at the door, looking at his watch, kind of like "let's go." But we were typically in and open up the building and rotate on reference desk shifts. But a lot of the time was processing collections or working with our student staff and directing them in processing collections, doing research for the university, or university departments... And to a great degree, the core of the job is much the same today as it was when we were in East Campus. A lot of the job is about fulfilling university research requests, kind of training students how to process collections and do research in the collections. And by and large, it has been a very satisfying thing for me to do over the last 20 years.

Cassie: You mentioned that when you first would get there, it would be you and Dr. Sharon Carlson opening up the building. What did that look like opening up and closing down the building each day because it was an older building?

John: Well, the building was... Our area was alarmed. And so you had to access by a keypad that was in a basement, exterior basement stairwell. You come down into the basement from an exterior stairwell, walk inside and you had like 30 seconds to shut the alarm down, and

then it was walking across the basement and turning lights on, checking things. If it had rained the night before, you might get a flashlight and check corners in the basement and make sure nothing had sprung a leak. Go through and come out onto the gym floor and do a walkthrough to turn on lights and disarm.

There were also alarms on the main doorway into the area, double doors coming into the gym. Occasionally, you would have a surprise, the central part of the building, birds could get into it and every once in a while they worked their way into our area and we would have to go up and open a window and hopefully the bird would find its way out.

Occasionally we'd run across a bat or two, you know, and I must say Sharon Carlson was a master at walking... capturing the bat and walking it outdoors and letting it go. But it was fairly straightforward, just kind of opening up. I never really worried about it too much from security standpoint because there were alarms, motion detect alarms on the building.

I do remember, at one point, kind of a story that makes me smile. At one point, East Hall showed up in a book called Haunted Kalamazoo. And the claim in the book, the building was clearly haunted. And when my children were young in the summer occasionally they would come to work with me.

And I would take them to classes downtown at the Kalamazoo Institute of Arts or Civic Theater. And at some point, they found out and read the passage about East Hall being haunted. And after that, they were always much more excited about coming to dad's workplace than they had been.

And if they came in with me first thing in the morning, they would be eagerly looking around corners in the basement. Obviously wanting to see the ghost of Dr. Waldo or, or some, you know, other specter. And unfortunately, they were disappointed.

Cassie: Did you ever read it and see what it said?

John: Yeah.

Cassie: What did it claim?

John: The inference was that people had seen an older, balding gentleman that generally fit the description of Dwight B. Waldo.

Cassie: Hmm okay.

John: And that they'd had encounters with the specter in the archives and a couple of comments about volunteers or students who had worked at the archives claimed to have seen this, I never did. I feel kind of like I've lost out somehow.

Cassie: Yeah we'll have to ask Sharon Carlson if she ever saw the ghost of Waldo.

John: And since Waldo's remains are interred in the building. And I can remember one of the, kind of, side things that I like to do if I got there particularly early, sometimes I'd walk

down to the columns next to where Waldo resided and look out over the city. Because you're looking east towards the sunrise and it could be a beautiful view in the mornings, and I'd commune with Waldo. And so I don't know, maybe he felt I didn't need any help since I came and talked to him on a regular basis.

Cassie: Ok, that must've been it.

John: Must have been.

Cassie: So, while we're sort of on the topic, what do you think impacted you the most during your time working on East Campus, whether it be an event or a place or some memory that you have?

John: I think in the end, the biggest impact... while East campus was the setting for the work, the biggest impact I think was the collections, what we housed and worked with and our interactions with the patrons coming in the door.

You know, in the end, anytime we had people that were happy with being able to locate the research that they wanted, the materials that they wanted, that was always, you know, the biggest positive for me.

Cassie: And how did you, I really only have two or three more questions. So how did you feel about East campus then when you were working on East campus versus now?

John: I had mixed feelings and I still do.

I sometimes go over and walk that area and I miss the older buildings and I have a sense of loss of place. I am glad that Walwood is still there in the form it is. I'm glad that Heritage Hall is still there. But I do miss, you know... and the area now is, it's beautifully landscaped and it's a nice place for events, but I do miss the old quad.

Cassie: The last question I have is... I know you mentioned it in this interview but also previously too. I think it was your uncle that went to U High or State High maybe?

John: Yes.

Cassie: Since you had so many family members that attended either the K-12 school on Western's campus or went to Western. What do you remember them telling you about their times here on east campus?

John: I remember my uncle had been recruited from his middle school to play basketball at State High at that time. He was a very good basketball player. He... the thing I can remember him talking about is that he thought he got a very good education there, he enjoyed playing basketball there, but also rubbing elbows and shoulders with the college players because they were all using the Oakland gym at the time. So both the high school athletes and the Western athletes would be using, kind of, the same areas and so you would have interactions with the older guys.

I know my uncle grew up in a blue-collar family and he did remark on the fact that a lot of his classmates were upper middle class or fairly wealthy, names like Upjohn and Gilmore came up. And so he was conscious of being a blue-collar kid with a mostly white-collar group of fellow students.

Cassie: Mmh, was there anything that you remember your mom or your grandma telling you about their time at WMU?

John: Unfortunately, my grandmother, I never knew her because she died of cancer fairly young.

Both my mother and my aunt talked about Western in warm terms. They like the school. They both felt comfortable at Western and were both very pleased when I came down here to do grad work. I do remember talking to my mother and I did a little searching in the Western Herald and kind of background on both my mother and my aunt.

One of the things I ran across about her that struck me is, her sorority and the sororities on campus did an event to roll bandages to be used for the war effort. And I found an article that talked about my mother who played violin and was in the orchestra at the university.

She was a part of a quartet that played while bandages were being rolled and they were preparing these to be sent off. And it struck me as being something of a very different time and place, where the sense of everybody's involved in the war effort. And with the V5 and V12 programs going on on campus at the same time, that Western was very active with the war effort on a number of levels.

Cassie: Well, the only other thing I have to ask really was, do you have any other memories that you thought of overtime or topics we didn't touch on that you wanted to share?

John: I know I've been very fortunate over the years of just having a lot of very good colleagues, and been fortunate to work with a large number of talented students.

And those are the things that I probably remember the most about anything that I've done in Western

Cassie: The people.

John: Absolutely.

Cassie: And then was there anything else?

John: I think that's it.