Smith: First of all, thank you very much for doing this. We appreciate it. Tell us a little bit about the paths, both personal and professional; that you traveled that eventually crossed paths with Gerald Ford.

Gill: I came over from Michigan State in 1957. In the fall of ’57, when he was running for re-election as Congressman - he’d already been in office, I think, about ten years by that time. I went to work for a television station here in town, the leading TV station owned by Time-Life Broadcasting, and Jerry would literally work himself to a lather on election day, even. Walking the streets, going from house to house, right up until eight o’clock, until the polls closed. Then he would come to the station because we had people out at all the different clerks’ offices, waiting for the returns to come in and we’d have them first. He’d come over and sit and watch the returns come in.

I had a lot of fun with him because he was so tired he’d fall asleep. We had a room next to the newsroom in those days. We had groups come down and wait – kids groups would come down and wait to go on the air. I’d help him get a table set up and he’d lay down on the table and go to sleep. I remember once going up, I guess part of that first year, and seeing Jerry. I knew he had a good sense of humor, he really did, and I’d shake him and I’d say, “Hey, jeez I’m sorry. You’d better come look at the returns.” And he’d come look at them at them and, boy, just light up. Because he was always way ahead.

Smith: That’s interesting because he really never had a competitive race after the first one.

Gill: No, he beat a guy who was an absolute Neanderthal.

Smith: Barney Jonkman.

Gill: Jonkman, I think, was his name. Yeah. And I think Arthur Vandenberg, who was senator then, talked him into running against Jonkman.
Smith: On what do you base that?

Gill: About Vandenberg? I probably read it somewhere at some point. I did not get it from Jerry. I don’t know that because that was probably ten years before I came to town.

Smith: But his dad had been active in local Republican politics.

Gill: Yes.

Smith: President Ford’s father would have known Vandenberg.

Gill: Yes, he would have.

Smith: Did you know his parents?

Gill: I did not, I didn’t know either one of them. And actually I never really knew his family that well. I knew Betty, but I didn’t know the kids. The kids were young then and growing up, and they didn’t bring them to meetings and they tried to keep them, I think, kind of out of it.

Smith: Again, it’s remarkable someone who really didn’t have to campaign at all, would campaign as hard as he did. Was it partly just because he loved campaigning?

Gill: I think Betty Ford, really a swell person, married a young attorney and thought that she was going to settle down in Grand Rapids, Michigan and have a nice family, and when he got the scent of the political trail – he never, never would have gotten off. And he never did. I think she, and I’ve got to tell you, I felt so bad for her at times because she felt so bad that she had lost him, lost him to politics.

Smith: Now, what leads you to that? Are we talking about the early days now?

Gill: Well, the early days and the late days. For example in the national convention in Chicago, I covered that for the station. I was given the assignment of following him everywhere because by now it had become fairly well, at least
rumored at that time, that Nixon had asked him to be his vice presidential running mate.

*This section redacted for Gill’s lifetime*

The happiest day of her life, and I think, I’m sure you were here at that time, I was with the city and I ran the news media for the – was it when he came back as president, or when we opened the Museum – I had the news media – when they had the performance in the Grand Hall – were you here for that?

Smith: No, I was not.

Gill: Okay. They had the performance in the Grand Hall and they had all of Jerry Ford’s favorite people, as far as entertainers go. One of them was Bob Hope. Bob Hope and Betty danced on the stage and I’m telling you, it was just magic. She was just absolutely flying. It must have been the opening of the Museum because, if he was past being president, or she wouldn’t have been that happy. She was just a kid again.

Smith: You could tell – almost night and day.

Gill: Yeah – like throwing a switch.

Smith: Of course, by that time, too, they’d had the intervention and she had beaten the alcohol and the pills, so it was a whole new life, as well.

Gill: Oh, yeah. It’s a real question in my mind as to who did more for the country, Jerry or Betty.

Smith: Well, you stop and think – we were talking to Dorothy Dowton, who had been his personal secretary in the White House, earlier today. And Dorothy is someone, who, like a lot of women, had a bout with breast cancer. She confirmed that it was simply something you just didn’t acknowledge. It was in the closet and Betty Ford, almost singlehandedly, changed that.

Gill: Oh, she singlehandedly did. My wife had breast cancer, too, and had it removed at the Betty Ford Breast Center here in town.
Smith: Really?

Gill: Yeah.

Smith: Grand Rapids has obviously changed physically a lot – and I think probably culturally a lot, too. Take us back to the late 50s, early 60s, when Congressman Ford had become sort of a local institution, but was just beginning to be a national figure.

Gill: Physically, you mean the town?

Smith: Both physically and culturally.

Gill: I came over, got this job offer from the station while I was still at Michigan State. As a matter of fact, I drove over here every night for the first six months because I was still going to school during the day and they wanted me to work. “If you want to work a job here, come now.” So, I came. I had brought my wife over before I accepted, and we drove up and down Monroe Avenue. Where Old Kent Bank is now and the gas company were old factory buildings. They were all shuttered. There were people living in them with their little hot plate things – cooking soup, cooking whatever they could. Every once in a while a fire would start and the firemen would come and put it out and two or three nights later, same thing. The town was grey.

Smith: Shabby?

Gill: Oh, way beyond shabby – way, way.

Smith: What was here, on the current site of the Ford Museum?

Gill: What was here – I believe at that time Voigt Mills may have been here, or perhaps nothing more than a few rambling buildings, factory buildings. There was a mill right downtown; the flour mill, Voigt Mills, and they had a wheel going and that’s why the dam and rapids and all that. There was an island in the middle of the river and they closed that in. It’s just amazing. The hotel – Pantlind – was all but down and out – run by a couple of brothers – the Roberts brothers. I’d go down there and eat once in a while and we went
down there – I’ll never forget – my wife and I went down one evening because it was supposed to be the last day that the hotel would be open, or something like that.

I was having dinner and one of the Roberts brothers – one of them was the upfront man – the other one ran the kitchen, and he came over and he says, “Hey, can I join you? I have something to tell you.” I said, sure. So he sat down. He said, “This is the happiest day of my life.” He said, “Rich DeVos just bought the hotel and he’s really going to fix it up.” He says, “I’ve got to show you around.” And he insisted, after we had dinner he took us all over the hotel, showed us the Presidential Suite up on the top floor. And he was so happy, and rightly so. And they have really turned things around, the people like DeVos, Van Andel, Secchia, although Secchia sometimes…

Smith: A bit of a lightning rod?

Gill: Oh, my, yes. I think there is nothing more typical about Pete than his story about when he was named ambassador. I’m sure you know this one. They took him out – I think he went down to Naples, and they took him out in a glass-bottomed boat to show him around the harbor and fish, whatever. And he’s sitting there looking down, and he’s being introduced to the media in Italy as the new ambassador. And he says, “Ah, there’s what’s left of the Italian navy that we sunk.” Something along that line.

Smith: Not very diplomatic.

Gill: Incredible. He and I never really saw eye to eye. I’ll leave it at that. We’ve had some good run-ins. Of course, he’s got money and I don’t.

Smith: The river, obviously, has only recently been rediscovered.

Gill: Yup.

Smith: What was it like fifty years ago?

Gill: It was not totally unlike what it is now. You have the fish ladder, you have all this lovely stuff along the banks now. Of course, the buildings and structures
along the banks made it look trashy, indeed. They have cleaned it up, thanks a lot to the environmental efforts.

I’ll tell you a little story about a guy I worked for. I was in charge of public relations/advertising for Union Bank, which turned into Chase now. The Frey family owned it. Ed Frey hired me because he was going to tear down old City Hall. I didn’t know that’s why he hired me at the time. The elastic between him and the community. But anyway, he had a great idea. He was going to have a marina right downtown and he spent a lot of money having engineers look into it. Finally, I think what really killed it was the Corps of Engineers couldn’t be persuaded to dredge all the way from here to Lake Michigan, which is what they would have had to have done.

Smith: And presumably that would have required Congressman Ford’s support.

Gill: Well, it would have, and he would have had that, I’m sure. But I just don’t think – maybe Jerry told him it can’t be done.

Smith: Let me ask you something because it’s a funny story, because it’s counterintuitive – the Sandy Calder sculpture must have divided the community.

Gill: Oh, fun. People put wrecked cars there the night before the dedication – on the plaza. They wanted a fountain, for God’s sake. When they didn’t get it…Bob Blandford, who was a city commissioner at the time, and really a gusto guy, he had a wrecked car dragged in and put on the plaza. We had to get it out of there in a hurry.

Smith: It’s interesting because Ford secured the funding through the National Endowment, either for the Humanities or the Arts. By his own acknowledgement, at that point he had never heard of Alexander Calder.

Gill: Yeah.

Smith: But I guess took a real interest in seeing it.
Gill: Well, there were a couple of people who made that happen. One was Peter Wege, and Nancy Mulnix, who was just determined to get him to do that. They worked on Jerry a lot and she’s very persuasive. Peter Wege is an heir to the Steelcase fortune and he threw a lot of money at it and Jerry knew where he was coming from, so…

Smith: Is Nancy around?

Gill: Nancy is around. Unfortunately, she had a divorce not long after the situation here. She left town for a lot of years, came back and she is a nurse now somewhere here in town. I ran into her a couple of times.

Smith: She is someone we should talk to. The interesting thing, the sequel is, that apparently – I don’t know whether the opposition died away once the piece was actually installed, but Dick Ford told us the one thing that his brother said about this museum. They wanted to put up a statue of him, and he didn’t want a statue of himself. But the only advice he had was, whatever art you get, make it representational. And, of course, they wound up with the spaceman, recognizing his work with NASA. So, I assume that’s a critique of…although he gave Sandy Calder the Medal of Freedom in the White House.

Gill: Yeah? I’ve got to tell you a Dick Ford funny one. My wife and I rented their condo down in Naples one winter for a couple of weeks. We went down and I’ve always got to head for the john right away whenever we land somewhere, so I’m going to the john, and I go in and I close the door, and here upon the bathroom door is a picture of Jerry looking down like this, and Dick had put something up there, some comic thing. And when we got back I saw Dick somewhere and I said, “You know, that’s the funniest thing ever.” He said, “We’ve got to keep him down to earth. We find ways.” I think he was president at the time.

Smith: It was really interesting, when we were talking with Dick I don’t think he was holding back, but he told us something that astonished me. He said, “This is going to surprise you, but I never talked politics with my brother, because
everyone else did, and usually they wanted something. And so, we had almost a politics-free zone.”

Gill: You know, that’s smart, really, for him, very smart.

Smith: Smarter than some presidential brothers.

Gill: Oh, yeah. We were down in Plains, Georgia once on vacation, going down to Florida. It was the time when Billy Carter had his little gas station going across the street. We went through Plains to see what it was like – to see the peanut store and all that. They had put up a large, artificial Christmas tree in front of the depot on Main Street. Billy had warned them not to do that because he wanted a natural Christmas tree. They’d gone ahead against his wishes. So the last anybody saw of that artificial Christmas tree was a pickup truck dragging it out of town at about forty miles per hour. They were something else. Didn’t he go to Africa or something trying to get business, or something.

Smith: Libya.

Gill: Oh my God.

Smith: Grand Rapids in early 60s – how conservative a town was this?

Gill: How conservative a town was it?

Smith: Yeah, and in particular, the influence of the Dutch Reformed culture and nightlife of the city.

Gill: I’m forgetting. There was no nightlife. This is the greatest stretch GR’s ever made in that direction. And they still don’t have much here to get convention goers to go to. That’s too bad.

Smith: Can you imagine, for example, to take one name of someone who packed the arena. Can you imagine Elton John playing a concert in Grand Rapids in the 60s?
Gill: No, I couldn’t, and, you know, the arena is what has done it. That’s what done it. It has spawned all the other activity around it. Most of it good; some bad, and the bad get shoved out at some point. I’ll tell you just briefly – I don’t know how much time you guys have…

Smith: We’ve got time.

Gill: When I first came over here and was a reporter with the station, we had little towns right around us, close around us – suburban towns – they were thinking about becoming municipalities. They were townships and they wanted to become municipalities because cities were starting to grab property from them, annex it. I was assigned to do a documentary – a half hour documentary, maybe it was an hour - on the pros and cons of becoming a municipality. And so I went out to several little towns and talked to the township people involved. I went to municipalities and talked to them and then I interfaced it – the good, the bad, and hope this helps you make up your mind, gives you some information so you can vote on Tuesday.

I did this and we were going to run it on a Sunday night – this was back when stations could get time in prime time to run their programs. The network didn’t own everything. We got an hour between nine and ten o’clock on Sunday evening, golden time for that kind of thing. We started promoting it – the minute the first promotions hit the air, I get a call from the mayor of one of these little towns – Hudsonville, just south of here between here and Holland. He said, “You’ve got to be kidding me. You can’t show that on Sunday.” And I said, “Why?” He said, “Because we can’t watch television.” I said, “Why?” He said, “Because our religion won’t permit it.” Ugh. I said, “You’re kidding me, aren’t you?” He said, “No, no, no. I’m not kidding you.” I said, “Well, then nobody will be watching from your town and they won’t know it’s on. I’m sorry about that.” He said, “You can’t do this.” I said, “I’m sorry, we’re going to.”

I talked to management. Management said call them back and tell him we’re going to run it at nine o’clock Sunday night. So I called him. He said, “Well, I’ll tell you what, we’re having a special meeting of the city commission
tomorrow night, and we want you and the management from the station to appear before the city commission.” I told the manager, and the manager says, “You go.” So I went out there and they took me apart, practically, and I’d been told to say that we’re going to run it at nine o’clock Sunday evening. Don’t look.

*This section redacted for Bill Gill’s lifetime.*

The hypocrisy is so thick, was much thicker than now. When we first came here we had a toboggan on top of our car on a Sunday. We’d been asked to come over to some friend’s house for dinner, or brunch, and they were going to go tobogganing, and we had the toboggan on top of the car. We parked in front of their house, got out, started to the door; this guy, friend, said, “Bill, could you park your car around the block, kind of?” He didn’t want anyone to know we were going to go tobogganing Sunday afternoon.

So, I don’t know. It is not as much the fact that they have these beliefs, it is the hypocrisy of them. Did you ever hear of a Dutch antenna? I did a job for Holland and Zeeland, they were going to combine their water and sewer services, and I ran a campaign for them and it worked for them. But while I was over there, this guy, he just moved over from Detroit, and was running this system, and he’d drive me around town to acquaint me with it. And we’d go by a beautiful home, he was telling what they sold for and yabba dabba, and he’d say, “And that one has a Dutch antenna.” And we’d drive on, and he’d see another one. That was in the days when you had antennas on the top of your house. You had to turn them to get the signal, no cable. And he’d say, “That one has a Dutch antenna.” I said, “What is a Dutch antenna?” He said, “They have them in their attic so when they change channels, nobody knows they’re watching TV on Sunday.” It’s the utter hypocrisy of it.

Smith: We were talking to Seymour Padnos and he was describing the late 40s when Ford first ran for Congress. It obviously hadn’t changed much in ten years, but he said that the liberal elements would go out on a Saturday night, buy a Sunday paper, put it aside, read it on Monday.
Gill: Sure…or in the basement, where they had the drinks, also.

Smith: But that’s interesting because [there is] this story in 1948 when Ford decides to run for Congress and he decides he wants to get married. There has always been a little bit of confusion, not so much over the sequence – he indicated to Mrs. Ford early in ’48 that he wanted to get married, but he had something else he had to do first. And he couldn’t tell her this big secret. Well, he was going to take on Jonkman, and he wanted to take him as much as possible by surprise. But it has always been contended that there was a little more to the story than that. That, in fact, he did want to marry her, but he didn’t want to risk marrying her as a divorcée…

Gill: Yeah, I’ve heard that, too.

Smith: …before the primary.

Gill: Yeah, I’ve heard that, too, and I wouldn’t doubt that that’s the truth because Jerry had guile about him. He was a politician.

Smith: Tell us about that.

Gill: Well, he always had the personae of being, and he was, he was a great guy, I loved the guy. I didn’t always agree with all the stuff he did and all the positions he took, but I realized the party was twisting him into it, and I did all I could to help him. But they were out of control at that time, just as they are now – scrapping among one another and wouldn’t agree to anything. I’m trying to think of something specific…

Smith: He clearly was ambitious. He wanted to be Speaker of the House.

Gill: Oh, that’s all he ever wanted to be. That’s all he ever wanted. He didn’t want to be president, he really didn’t.

Smith: You said you were at the ’60 convention, were you at the ’64 convention?

Gill: No, I was not.
So, here’s someone, now by the mid-60s he becomes Minority Leader, after the Goldwater debacle. And all sorts of additional demands are placed upon him. He’s traveling very extensively. Did he still get home frequently?

Oh, yeah, he got home. As a matter of fact, I think most of the time he would leave Betty with the kids in Virginia and come home for the weekend. He really took care of his constituents, and he had a good working office here. He had a good staff and you could ask for something and you could be sure that if they didn’t get it, they had done their very best to try to get it for you.

He excelled at constituent service?

Oh, yeah, he really took care of anybody that wanted help. He’d try his best to help them. I think that was genuine, too. But he knew he had to do that in order to remain in office, otherwise somebody would come up behind him and start a better campaign than he was doing.

Tell me, was there a significant African-American population in Grand Rapids.

They weren’t voting very heavily then at all. And I think the population, this is a guess on my part, ten percent or so at the most – if that. But they weren’t voting hardly at all in those days. And this is what, of course, submitted it for Obama. He had solid support from African-Americans.

Yeah, but who have predicted that he would have carried Kent County?

I would have. I worked for him.

What that suggests is, a lot of folks who liked Gerald Ford, voted for Barak Obama.

Yup.

What does that say about the changes?

Well, the changing times. I think Jerry, if he looked at what Obama’s doing now with the giveaways to banks or to church companies, and all that money
out there, and all that debt he’s building up, I think he’d go nuts. I really do. He wouldn’t be able to stand it.

Smith: He was a true fiscal conservative.

Gill: Yes, he was. And I don’t like this, either. I keep hoping that Obama is going to be a man of his word and will work on reducing the deficit. Otherwise, we’re going to be in worse trouble than we’re in now. So, we’ll see.

Smith: The Republican Party, I take it, as long as Ford was in Congress, was pretty unified here in West Michigan?

Gill: Yeah. They were not like they are today. I don’t know if you are aware of it, but they just booted the Utah governor who was supposed to come here and talk to Kent County Republicans. And this lady who is an absolute Looney Tune makes donuts – she and her husband.

Smith: Do they have holes?

Gill: That is a very good question. She took it upon herself, by herself, to tell him not to come.

Smith: It’s interesting – I don’t mean to get off on a side road, but it is consistent with that. You probably know there is an effort underway, and it’s moving forward, to put a statue of President Ford in the Rotunda of the Capitol.

Gill: I thought that was a done deal.

Smith: It is, but it wasn’t for a long time. And, in fact, what happened was – in some ways he would be very proud of this – it was held up by a couple of Republican state senators in Western Michigan, who ostensibly were claiming that one of the statues of Senator Chandler - which is going to the Detroit Historical Society as part of the deal – that you can’t rewrite history and you shouldn’t move Chandler and so on. Well, in fact, they were refighting the old Reagan/Ford wars. These new conservatives – to whom Jerry Ford is some sort of dangerous liberal.

Gill: Yeah.
Smith: And, in the end, what happened was that at the end of the session, it was coming right down to the wire, a black senator from Detroit asked for the floor of the Senate. He got up and he said, “Let me tell you a story about Jerry Ford.” Well, it turns out this guy is the grandson of Willis Ward, who was the president’s black friend at the University of Michigan. There was an issue when Georgia Tech said they wouldn’t play and Ford was going to quit the team, and all this. So he got up and he told this very powerful story, and it was gavelled through. But the irony is, it was a Democrat from Detroit, African-American, and not a Republican who saw to it that his statue will be in the Capitol. Which tells you something about the Republican Party today, even in Kent County.

Gill: I’ve got to tell you, this friend of mine, Bob Eleveld I was telling you about. I don’t know how well he knew Jerry, but he has been county chairman here. He’s an attorney here in town, been country chairman, gee, I don’t know how many times, and was a good county chairman. But he’s a moderate. And he and I just commiserate because we brought McCain here, as I said, when he ran against Bush the first time for the nomination. And he came out against him at the same time Milliken did, because I walked to them both. You need to say what you believe. They’ll talk to you about – you know – but try to get them to take a stand publicly, “Well…maybe I can get in and rebuild the party.”

Smith: When Ford became vice president, did that come as a shock?

Gill: Not really. Did you ever see the letter I wrote him, by chance – Ford?

Smith: I don’t think so.

Gill: Well, I’ve got a copy of it. I’ll give it to you, but I can tell you briefly about it, if you want me to, about that part of it.

Smith: Sure.

Gill: He always had a group that he’d talk to when he came to town, but when he got down to…
Smith: Can you remember who they were? Some of those folks? Were they sort of the kitchen cabinet?

Gill: Yeah. And it was broad in the beginning. He would go over here when the Pantlind was the Pantlind. This was in the early years when I knew him in the 50s. They had a little restaurant right on the street called the Knife and Fork. I called it the Knife and Ford, because he was always there when he came to town. He didn’t really make the rounds as much as he did sit in the Knife and Fork and drink coffee and talk to people. He enjoyed it.

Smith: He liked people.

Gill: Oh, he did, he liked to talk to people and listen to them. And he would listen, he really would. I don’t know if it was part of an act or not, I don’t know, who knows what’s real and what’s not. But, anyway, I’d catch him there. I caught him there one day and he starts ragging on me because he was sending, and all the other Congressmen, too, but Jerry was always there – they would send out a little film clip. There was no video tape in those days, just a little film reel, Your Congressman Reports. You could count on him. He wanted to know why in the world we aren’t running them all the time. I said, “Jerry, they aren’t that interesting.” I said, “Everybody expects that you’re doing those things, and you can’t just keep running them over and over if they are not of interest to the people, to the viewers.” “Well…[mumbling].” I said, “You know, you ought to do something different. Why don’t you talk to old Everett Dirksen?” He was in the Senate then. I said, “See what you guys…” And I’ll be durned if three or four weeks later, they didn’t announce the Ev and Jerry Show. Did you ever see that thing?

Smith: Yeah.

Gill: Oh, God. They were like Abbott and Costello. I don’t know who sic’d them on the networks, but they started giving them to all the networks and the networks would feed them to the stations, and stations all over the country were running it. I was so happy over that.

Smith: He was not a natural showman.
Gill: No, no. He was not. He was a straight man and Everett Dirksen standing there with this ludicrous face of his, and that voice. They were fun.

Smith: Back to when he became vice president. Did FBI agents descend on the town?

Gill: Oh, wow. Let me tell you just a little bit about – and I’ll leave you a copy of this letter. I was reminding him – what got me to write the letter to Jerry. After I got off to other things, I was with the university out in Jersey for a while, and that kind of stuff, and came back. I left the university and came back as news director at 8 in I believe in September of ’74. Nixon – they already had the Watergate hearings. They were still underway, and it was very clear Nixon was going to be gone one way or the other. Either he was going to leave on his own or they were going to impeach him. So, Jerry, by then was vice president. Agnew had resigned under fire – or was he impeached?

Smith: He resigned.

Gill: And Jerry had become vice president. Nixon finally made good on his offer for him to be his vice president. He was coming to town and making rounds of the whole country, I think, I’m not sure of that. But I would be willing to bet that he had the same kind of meetings wherever he went in the country, and he was traveling widely at that time. But he had a group here, it was four guys; myself, a high Republican official, a preacher, and a marketing manager here in town who had done work for him. So it was a marketing man, myself, I was news director, and the station was about a block from his little offices over on Cherry Street.

We met there with him about two months. It was the last time the group met with him there about two months before Nixon resigned and he became president. And he was absolutely lost. Just didn’t know what to do. He said, “I have a feeling that he’s going to be impeached, it looks like a certainty.” And he says, “I just don’t know what to do. I’m supporting him, yet I wonder where we’re going with this thing.”

Smith: Did he entertain doubts as to the president’s guilt – or innocence?
Bill Gill

May 7, 2009

Gill: Well, he says, “I believe Dick. I’ve been in Congress with him since the beginning. I believe him.” So he wasn’t really expressing any doubt, if he did. And everybody just kind of sat there kind of stoned because it was very clear to the rest of us that Nixon was a goner. It was just a question of how long he’s going to be able to hang on. Finally I said, “Jerry, you know, you’ve got to back off. It’s like a big tree falling in the forest. If you get hit by it…the American people are really, really, counting on you and you’ve got to maintain your credibility, or you won’t be able to handle it once you become president.” I said, “You’ve got to back off.” He says, “I can’t, nobody else will support him. Nobody else is behind him.” I said, “Doesn’t that tell you something?” And the rest of them then chimed in and said that you really do, you need to back away. And I think we put a real doubt into him. But I’m not suggesting that – I think he talked to a lot of people and I think he got the same advice everywhere he went.

Smith: But it’s interesting that – I don’t want to put words in your mouth, but clearly, if he, at that point, was expressing concerns about the likelihood of impeachment, that meant he was wrestling in his own mind with the likelihood that he would be president.

Gill: Oh, I think you’re right. Oh, absolutely, I think you’re right. But he did not want to seem to be…the guy was loyal to a fault – to a fault.

Smith: Well – it’s almost a flip side of his admirable qualities. He was always a bit of an Eagle Scout, and with that went a genuine desire to believe the best of people, and I think he was genuinely shocked when he belatedly realized that Richard Nixon lied to him. Isn’t that naiveté on his part?

Gill: Of course it is. And it was part of his makeup, I think. I think good boys far outweighed the bad ones with Jerry. I don’t think Jerry was an extremely intelligent man. He was a political man. I think his morals were beyond reproach. You didn’t get any foot tapping out of Jerry. And he was just a family man and I think and I’ve heard him remark on this himself, I think he believed in living the Boy Scout life. He was an Eagle Scout and he lived that
life. And I can’t disagree with that. I was, too. I wasn’t an Eagle Scout, but I was a Scout.

Smith: But it also comes back to this. For example: he becomes president, and on August 28th he has his first press conference. He goes into that press conference believing that everyone is going to want to talk about Cyprus and Turkey and Greece and inflation, and everything except what everyone wants to talk about, which is Richard Nixon. He didn’t handle it terribly well, and was angry at himself, and I think he was angry at the world. I think that press conference was the triggering event that led, ten days later, to the pardon. Now the pardon might have happened anyway, but it goes back again to this kind of naiveté, having been in Washington as long as he had been there, to not sense the mood of the press corps.

Gill: I think you’re right. Do you know the part that Phil Buchen played in that situation?

Smith: I don’t think so.

Gill: You know who Phil Buchen is?

Smith: Oh, yes. Sure.

Gill: Phil was his early law partner and was his personal attorney after he went to the White House. He relied on him a lot. Phil was a great guy, I don’t know if you ever met him. He was just a great guy. He and I went to the same church, and all that stuff – a very liberal church. Duncan Littlefair was the pastor, married my wife and I. Anyway, Phil Buchen, I know, came back to Grand Rapids and met with Duncan Littlefair, who was not Ford’s pastor, but who was Phil Buchen’s pastor. And they talked about it and he persuaded Ford to listen to them.

Smith: He, being who – Phil or Duncan Littlefair?

Gill: Phil Buchen persuaded Ford to listen to Littlefair and him, and they talked to him. I’m 99 percent certain that is what swayed him into taking the course that he did.
Smith: On the pardon.

Gill: Yes. And he may have anyway. Who knows? But they were very persuasive that you really need to wipe the slate clean on this thing. Otherwise it’s going to dog you and the country, and you don’t need it.

Smith: It’s interesting that you say it’s a very liberal church, presumably Duncan Littlefair was liberal theologically, politically, and yet, coming from the left, why would he be urging Ford to…

Gill: Well, Duncan was a different kind of a guy. He didn’t always come out of left field. He was very rational. He didn’t always come out of right field. He was very rational.

Smith: That’s fascinating. Was Buchen as close to Ford as anyone?

Gill: I think he was probably closer to him than anyone, really. I really do. They always, always remained very close friends. You know, I’m ashamed to say, I believe Phil died – I’m not sure.

Smith: Yeah.

Gill: He did? But otherwise I could get you to him.

Smith: It’s a fascinating window. Was there much unhappiness when people here learned that Ford was going to be retiring to California rather than Grand Rapids?

Gill: Well, I guess so. I guess you could say unhappiness, I was looking for the right word. I guess sorry-ness, sorry that he was doing that.

Smith: Were they hurt?

Gill: Yeah, it hurt. It hurt because the town, the district, had always supported him and everybody liked him, and they wanted to see him present, badly.

Smith: Do you remember the ’76 campaign – at the end when he came back. That must have been a very emotional…
Gill: It was.

Smith: And he lost it, didn’t he? Out at the airport at the mural? Were you there?

Gill: I’m trying to remember. He had lost the campaign to Carter?

Smith: No, this was at the end of the campaign, when he – I think on election day, actually – they dedicated the mural out at the airport.

Gill: Oh, oh. No, I was not there. Paul Collins did that for him, didn’t he? I wrote a thesis for Paul Collins when he was a young strapping guy. Somebody sent him to me, I was with the bank at that time, and he wanted to raise money to go to Africa. And I wrote him some stuff to carry around to businessmen and he walked around with it. And durn if he didn’t get the money. And he went. He’s done very well.

Smith: As an ex-president, though, Ford came back here frequently.

Gill: Oh, yeah, he did.

Smith: I mean, well into his eighties and his ninetieth birthday was probably his last big public appearance.

Gill: I wasn’t really in touch with him then because by then, as I said, everybody with a buck had made really good friends with him, and they wanted time with him and I always felt like I was just butting in.

Smith: Do you remember the last time you saw him?

Gill: Yeah. I guess the last time that I really had a chance to talk to him at all, was when they dedicated the Amway Grand Plaza. He came back here for that. I’ll tell you a funny story about that. I was communications director at that time and I was running the media and we had an unbelievable crowd because they were having a Canada, Mexico, I believe, he had four or five presidents here. And they were having a little summit. I got to talk to him for a while then, but they locked us up – locked the media up. Have you heard this?

Smith: No.
Gill: It wasn’t right. The Secret Service always takes over, you know, when they come to town. I’ve worked with them a lot with people coming to town, and when they come to town you might as well figure out that anything you’ve been told by anybody else doesn’t mean a damn thing. They are going to handle it.

They locked us up in a room over here in the hotel and said you must stay there until everybody has had dinner and then we’ll let you out and you can come out for the speeches. So they went away and left us alone there, and everybody was saying, “Gee, they’d better give us dinner, we’re hungry.” And so I ordered out for, I don’t how many, God only knows, truckloads of pizza, kegs of beer, and they came in and set it up. Everybody had lots of pizza, everybody had lots of beer.

At some point the trigger started going off with the guys saying, “Oh, my God, I’ve got to take a leak.” Finally, and I beat on the door, trying to get the Secret Service to come. Nobody. So Sam Donaldson was there, and he was just as irascible as he is now, he actually climbed up on a table, says, “If somebody doesn’t unlock that damned door, I’m going to unzip and let her fly.” This was a panic call, so I practically tore the door down. Finally got a Secret Service guy there, and they set up a channel for us of Secret Service people from there to the men’s room.

Smith: Were you surprised by the reaction when the president died? I mean, the overwhelming public reaction?

Gill: You mean as far as him going to California.

Smith: No, when he died – at the time of his death.

Gill: No, I don’t know, because I think everybody was expecting it.

Smith: But in terms of the public response, the long lines, the crowds…

Gill: Oh, no. The town loved the guy. They loved him. And they had forgiven him for going to California. They didn’t like it but, hey, he’s got a right to have a life after he’d gone through what he has.
Smith: Quickly, this place – putting it here instead of out in the suburbs somewhere, what’s it done for the town?

Gill: It, along with Grand Valley State University, has just made this side of the river. The west side was settled mostly by immigrants who came here to work in factories, and they were good people, but they were poor people and their houses were not all that good, and run down and they were right downtown, essentially. They managed to, with the expressway, and this, and the college, they managed to really clean up the area a little, if you want to put it that way. It’s a good thing.

Smith: Thank you. I feel like I know Grand Rapids much better.
INDEX

C
Calder sculpture, 6–7

D
Dutch Reformed Church
influence of, 8–11

F
Ford, Gerald R.
  Congressional days, 15
  first acquaintance with, 1
  Nixon, personal relationship with, 17
  Nixon pardon, 18–19
  personal stories about, 7–8, 20–21
  Ward, Willis, 14

G
Grand Rapids, Michigan
  pre-downtown revitalization, 4–6