

Gerald R. Ford Oral History Project
David Mehney
Interviewed by
Richard Norton Smith
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Smith: How did you first cross paths with Gerald Ford?

Mehney: I met Jerry probably in the late '60s – '69-'70, when he was a congressman. And then in 1972 - I started my business in '66 – built a new building in '67, which was 10,000 square feet and every year we added on to it. And then in 1972, we doubled it. I think it went from 70,000 up to 140,000, we put in an exercise room for our people, sauna, bath, racquet ball court, and all that. I asked Jerry if he would come and cut the ribbon. We knew each other, but we really got to know each other after that. He came and cut the ribbon as a congressman.

Smith: Tell us about your business.

Mehney: I was a Kawasaki motorcycle distributor in five states and probably was very instrumental in putting Kawasaki on the map because I became very, very close to the Japanese. We brought a lot of their engineers over here. The thing about Japanese engineers - all engineers are good - but the Japanese engineers – “Oh, ah so, we understand what you want and what you need. We can do that.” European engineers, on the other hand, say, “This is the right way to do it. This is what you’re going to get. This is it.”

Smith: I assume, in 1972, this was a city and a culture less accustomed to welcoming foreigners?

Mehney: Oh, yeah.

Smith: Than it is forty years later?

Mehney: Yeah. Even back when I got in the motorcycle business, although there was still that sentiment out there, Pearl Harbor and all that. This is interesting, because my first year in Japan was 1967, and I made a point to try to learn their culture and how they thought and all that. It’s really an amazing culture

and customs. Like when President Nixon was in China, and he toasted with the president of China; our people didn't think anything about that. And I said, "Holy cow, this is something special," because the Orientals, the Chinese and the Japanese, if they don't respect you and don't like you, they don't toast with you. Period. And they don't usually invite them to their homes. I said this is really special because you have to really be special to be invited to one of their homes.

Knowing their culture and everything has made a big difference. I know how a lot of Americans still feel about the Japanese because of Pearl Harbor. I said, "How do the Japanese feel about the Americans because of the A-bomb?" And they told me; on the contrary, they think it was the right thing to do. They do not hold Americans guilty at all because they had been lied to by their leaders. We're winning the war; die before you surrender. And they knew the United States had two choices: drop the bomb or invade. If they invaded there could be millions of people killed from both sides.

Smith: Have you been to Hiroshima?

Mehney: I've never been there. They've taken me everywhere, but I've never been there.

Smith: We went a few years ago. It's an extraordinary place, very moving.

Mehney: I thought that was unique on their part. And the other thing that was very interesting; they showed me everything. Kawasaki was a conglomerate; they made their ships, they made their best planes in World War II - not the Zero - but the best ones and they were bombed on from the U.S. I saw some of the ruins and all that. But what was really unique, during the Vietnam War, there were only two companies that made that twin, Vertol helicopters that the Marines use - Boeing, Kawasaki. They all were taken to Kawasaki for reconditioning, and Kawasaki was also making a two-man camouflage jet bomber. They showed me all that, but they said, "You cannot take pictures of it. But we'll show it to you." So I couldn't take any pictures. And the reason why the Japanese people, even today, you'll understand this, under no circumstances do they like war. They'd been through it. They'd had it on their

home ground. They'd been through it, so if the Japanese people knew Kawasaki was doing this, they would be frowned on by their people.

Smith: I assume you didn't get Congressman Ford on a motorcycle.

Mehney: No, but some of his buddies did; one of his close buddies, Dick Gillett, rode a motorcycle. I had him on a motorcycle and he used to drive it back and forth to the country club.

Smith: Let me back up a bit because we hear how almost legendary a figure he was as a congressman. What was it about Congressman Ford that made him so effective? And so popular?

Mehney: I guess you'd say it all – because he's 'Jerry.' He insisted on being called Jerry, even as a president. He really listened to the people; I think he wasn't controversial, and he tried to work things out on both sides of the aisle. He had friends on both sides of the aisle and I'll tell you about that a little bit later. I've watched him from a congressman to a vice president and to a president, and his personality never changed, it never went to his head. He was still the same person. No ego. Humble, and just really a good, honest person.

Back to the motorcycles. He was never on a bike, but his youngest son, Steve, was in high school and his parents caught him smoking. And his mother and dad said, "What will it take, Steve, to get you to quit smoking?" And he was probably sixteen years old at the time, and Steve says, "Dad, if you buy me a motorcycle, I'll quit smoking." Now, what do you do as a parent? What's worse – smoking or motorcycles? Jerry called me and he said, "What should I do?" And I said, "Well, Jerry, do you have a farm – places he can ride the motorcycle to keep him off the road?" He said, "Yes, we do. There are places here we can do that." I said, "Then I would get him a motorcycle.

I'll tell you what, you send Steve back here for four or five days, and we have a big field in the back of our facility and I'll have my best guys train him how to handle a motorcycle." The worst part of a motorcycle is the first week or two of ownership. Your instincts aren't there. You've always got to pay attention to what's ahead of you. "You do that, and we'll offer that to you."

The interesting thing is that because I had Dick Gillette, I had like nine Detroit Tigers, Mickey Lolich, Bill Freehand, Mickey Stanley, and others of the Tiger's World Series, on motorcycles - and what I would do, I would give them the motorcycle, title it in their name so they are responsible for it and they've got to pay the insurance. At the end of the year, they give it back to me and I give them another one. I said, "I'll do the same thing for you, Jerry." Politically, that's probably not correct, but that's what happened. And we did that and Steve came and we trained him and for three or four years he honored it, and quit smoking and Jerry was very, very appreciative of that.

Smith: That's a great story. So in '72 you have your ribbon cutting. And then obviously life gets very interesting for him.

Mehney: Right.

Smith: Let me ask you, because we've got conflicting reports - someone who I probably shouldn't mention suggested that he was part of what I would call for lack of a better word, a kitchen cabinet. A very small, informal group who met and who, while Ford was vice president, not long before Nixon's resignation, pressed him to acknowledge the fact that he might be president and get ready, etc., etc. And other people have said, "Well, we've never heard of the existence of such a group, and it doesn't sound like Ford." Does any of that ring a bell with you?

Mehney: I don't buy any of that. It's interesting. I talked to Jerry Ford that Friday morning before Nixon announced that he was going to be vice president. That morning, as a congressman; and I'll tell you the conversation.

Smith: Was Ford vice president at this point?

Mehney: No, no. Ford was congressman. Maybe it was a Saturday. It was a Friday or Saturday, whenever...

Smith: Before he was nominated to be vice president?

Mehney: Nixon announced it that afternoon or early evening. I talked to him early that morning because I had to catch a flight to Dallas because my sister was getting married. I talked to him before I left, and when I got there I watched

the news conference, and during this conversation in the morning – we were talking about some other things – but then I said, “You know, Jerry, there’s a lot of talk about you being the next vice president.” And he said, “Yeah, there is. And the reason why is because the Democrats know I have no ambition to be president. They know that I just serve this and then at the end of the two years, or whatever it is, I go away.” And that was appealing to him. “I got along with both sides of the aisle and I’m very non-controversial.” And that’s big to them. So it would be an easy thing.

But you know what he said? “But you know who Nixon really wants?” And I said, “No, who?” And he said, “Connally. But they know they can’t get him because he does have aspirations to be the president. He quit the Democratic Party and join the Republican Party – that would have been a war so we couldn’t afford to do that.” And I said, “Well, you know Jerry, it’s not every day somebody asks you to be vice president.” We kind of chuckled and I said, “As a matter of fact, it’s not every day somebody from Grand Rapids is asked to be vice president.” And we chuckled about that. I would bet you my life that he did not know that, that morning.

Smith: Okay.

Mehney: Even though he knew he was in the picture.

Smith: That also raises another interesting thing, a very interesting thing. And it’s kind of hard by its very nature to nail down. Everyone talks about him being a man without guile, which is not necessarily a man without ambition, or even calculation. And I wonder whether he knew there were people who underestimated him, people who tended to write him off for whatever reason. “Good old Jerry.” And whether he used that - appearing naïve, particularly in a place like Washington, is not a bad strategy. My hunch is by the morning of that day he probably had a pretty good idea that he was [the choice].

Mehney: You’re right – there’s no question, if he knew what was going to happen he wasn’t going to tell me. That’s just my impression by reading between the lines. And I could be all wrong, but that’s my impression. And I was also told later on, he was at home on the telephone in the afternoon when he got a call

from the President, and he put the President on hold for a minute while he was finishing his phone call. So that also tends me to believe that maybe that was the phone call that...

Smith: Iced it.

Mehney: That iced it. And so that's why I feel he didn't know about it in the morning. And the other thing that I think is very interesting, and I don't know if anybody has ever said this in your interviews, but I was also told he took three people from Grand Rapids. Phil Buchen, who was a very close friend and very well respected attorney here in town; of course, Bill Seidman, who everybody knows; and then his buddy Jack Stiles.

Smith: Tell me about Jack Stiles, because he clearly was an important figure in all of this and he may be the least well known, certainly outside of the local community. Who was Jack Stiles, and why was he as close as he was?

Mehney: I can't answer that because I didn't know him at the time. I know the name. The interesting thing is, I am part owner of Thousand Oaks Golf Club, which is all the land that Jack Stiles owned at one time. In fact, when Jerry was still playing golf, I wanted him to come back and play there one time because this is all solid oaks and rolling woods, and everything else, and he had his retreat there. And this is where he got away and I know he had a lot of his political friends go out there, because it was twelve minutes from downtown, but you think you're up north. And when Jack went to Washington, kids from two school found it and by the time we got it and started clearing it, which was in 1998, it was trashed because they partied there all the time. And then when Jack was killed in an auto accident, a friend of mine is the one who bought it from his estate, and that's how I got involved in it. But that's about all I know. I think Jack Stiles was probably very politically oriented and knew a lot of politicians and they did a lot of things together and all that. Jerry is a very loyal guy to his friends and his people. Very loyal.

Smith: That's interesting. Tell us about Phil Buchen.

Mehney: Phil Buchen - I happened to be in high school with his daughter, she's two years behind me, so I knew him - but I was young and respected him. But to

me, he was a brilliant guy, very trustworthy and a very solid person. And when you're in Washington, you've got to have somebody like that. And the story that was told to me, and I believe it, because I heard it from good sources when it became known – when Nixon got into trouble – what does he do? And supposedly Buchen and Ford went to Camp David together to discuss it. And I think Phil was there to tell him what he can do, can't do with the law, from that point of view. And that's when Jerry decided we cannot afford to go through a long ordeal with a trial with Nixon and he pardoned him. Cost him the election, but the two of them, that's what I was told and I believe that, where they went up to Camp David and they made that decision. The best thing we can do for the country is end it. And he was spot on. Unfortunately, the rest of the people in the country didn't understand it.

Smith: When the pardon was initially announced, what kind of reaction happened here in Grand Rapids?

Mehney: You know, I don't remember any kind of reaction one way or the other. Maybe because I agreed with that decision, because the last thing you need is to tear the country down. And he did the right thing, and unfortunately – I was invited to the funeral and all the things that went on at the funeral, and the whole country – now they all come up and praise him for that decision. It's too bad they couldn't have done that in his lifetime.

Smith: He lived long enough to know that most people had come around. So he had that satisfaction. Of course, the kids grew up in Washington, really. And Mrs. Ford was there. Did you know her at all?

Mehney: Yes, and my impression is, she was happy for him to be vice president and go back home. She didn't like the limelight, she didn't like all the stuff that goes with it. She's just a very nice person that doesn't care for all this stuff. But she would do whatever for Jerry. She was just hoping, I think, that he would serve his two years as vice president and then come home.

Smith: They were going to come back to Grand Rapids.

Mehney: Come back to Grand Rapids. And they moved to California for very good reasons, mainly because of Betty's health and all that. It was much better for

her to live there than here. But this is still always home to them and they were always very special here.

Smith: Were there people upset at the time that they moved to Palm Springs, California?

Mehney: There were people that were; but that's shallow. They don't really understand that this is the best thing for Betty for the health reason. A lot of people move to Arizona and Palm Springs for health reasons. That's the best thing for her. And I think they eventually got over that and they realized it. But at the beginning you heard a little bit of rumblings here and there.

Smith: And he did come back.

Mehney: A lot. And always did whatever he could for the community. Well, look where he's buried. That says it all right there.

Smith: Yeah.

Mehney: And that's where Betty will be, too.

Smith: Did you see him at all during the presidency?

Mehney: Yes, two things: one, Guy Vander Jagt, and I don't know if anybody has ever talked about Guy.

Smith: Can I tell you what President Ford said? Obviously, they were friends – but he held up Guy Vander Jagt as the perfect example of a very talented congressman who forgot where he came from. In the sense that as he went national, he spent less and less time back home, creating a situation where he was vulnerable. It's interesting that Ford, who had a safe seat, throughout his congressional career, never made that mistake.

Mehney: Right. And that's true, he'd come back here. Like Cedar Springs, it's a little small community north of here, for the annual Red Pajamas, or whatever they called it.

Smith: Red Flannel Days.

Mehney: He was always there. I mean, Jerry never did forget and was always here. But Guy Vander Jagt – now Jerry became president, and from my perspective, that really wasn't his ambition or goal. But once he got there, he loved it. He absolutely loved it, and that's why he ran again. And he was doing a lot of good, too. Guy Vander Jagt had an idea; there's an artist in town. You've heard of him, Paul Collins. You see his work, black artist. And I knew Paul. I met Paul right when I got started in the motorcycle business in 1965. Paul is one of these people who can really do a portrait of somebody and you almost think it was a picture. He has a great talent. And Guy came up with this idea: let's have Paul depict Jerry's life and some of the key things that really mean a lot to him in his lifetime. And they set up a committee, and it was a black committee and then Paul asked me to be on the committee. I was the only white guy on the committee. Bobby Butler was the chairperson.

Smith: That raises a question - because African-Americans generally vote Democratic. Was he involved with that part of the community?

Mehney: I can't honestly answer that, other than my gut shot feeling here locally, yes. Let's say they are more for him than what they would be throughout the United States, because history shows usually 80% of them vote Democratic. But he had no racial bones in his body at all. It was very good and I'll tell you one of the things that happened. What Guy wanted to do, it was his feeling, you unveil this thing about thirty days to forty-five days before the election, because you have a black artist doing this thing with Ford. Terrific idea.

Smith: Yeah, very good idea.

Mehney: Terrific idea. So this started probably in the summer a year before the election. I was invited to a State Dinner in Washington – Linda and I were invited to a State Dinner, which was a thrill. And it was in the fall. At that time I said we need to raise money to pay for this whole thing, to pay the artist. So I came up with the idea: let's do reproductions and if Jerry will sign it and Paul will sign it, I'll number them and we'll sell them for two hundred dollars. We'll do one hundred and fifty of them. I thought, "Gee, the President of the United States puts his signature on that, you get a copy of it and there's only a hundred and fifty. At two hundred dollars, I'm doing you a favor." So

when I was at the State Dinner, I asked Jerry if he would sign them and he said, "Absolutely." And so it was a done deal.

Well, then, the next two or three months gone by, four months, nothing was happening. And I was getting nervous. I said, "You know, I'm going to get out of this thing because I'm not going to embarrass him and I'm not going to embarrass myself." I'm in Florida on spring break, and I'm at a club eating and I get a call from Guy Vander Jagt. And I don't know how the hell he knew I was there, or how he found me; but I guess they can find you wherever you are. He begged me to stay on. So I came back and I said, "All right, I will," and I told Paul, "You and I are making a deal. I'll guarantee you the money, you guarantee me that gets done, because there is not going to be any embarrassment here." And so we did that.

Well then, I had an idea to help plan that event, and so during that time I had conversations with Jerry also. I had the whole thing outlined. I said, "What do you think about this?" Back to your one question: one of the inner city schools, grade school, first grade through sixth grade, they made cookies and sold them and raised \$75 to help this cause. So that kind of gives you an idea what they thought of him in this town. And I thought that was precious. So I went to the grade school and interviewed the principal, and I said, "During our unveiling, I want six kids, a first grader, second grader, third grader, fourth grader, fifth grader, sixth grader. And all they are going to do is they are going to be part of the program; when the right time comes up, they are going to give a bouquet of roses to Betty after the unveiling and then they go sit down." And then I talked to Rev. Abney, I don't know if you've ever heard of Rev. Abney, but he was the Reverend at the Church of the Pentecostal Choir, which is nationally known. An incredible choir. I asked Rev. would he bring his choir and sing at the unveiling, and had everything planned out and Jerry endorsed everything.

Smith: By the way, had he seen...

Mehney: The mural? No.

Smith: He knew nothing about its contents ?

Mehney: No. And I'll get into that. So now we're at the ceremony and now it's the unveiling and he goes on the stage and he unveils it. I don't know if you've seen the mural or not.

Smith: Oh sure.

Mehney: He unveils it. He starts to cry. He's looking at his parents, he looks at his kids, and he starts to cry. Of course his car's there, his first home and a lot of the different things. He starts to cry. And the people who were invited for the unveiling at the airport are the ones that really donated to the mural, and their wives or whatever, and so we had quite a number of people there. And I'm up on stage and looking out and everybody is crying. It's just all the way through the whole thing. And he talked, and of course his lip was quivering and all that, and he was having a rough time because it meant so much to him and got so sentimental when he saw it.

Then after we got through that, it was time for the kids to go up there to give them the roses. You have these black kids go up and give the roses and they are supposed to go and sit down. Jerry grabbed three of them; she grabbed three of them; and was just hugging them and wouldn't let them leave. And they are just standing there. Then the Pentecostal Choir played *God Bless America*, and the whole place went down.

Guy's whole idea was to do this thirty days before the election. You know when it was done? The day of the election. And I'll guarantee you that if he would have done it thirty days before, he would have won the election because he would have picked up another fifteen-twenty percent of the black vote because they see that; the real man as he is. Guy had all that foresight, which I thought was tremendous.

Smith: It's a great story.

Mehney: And after he lost the election and the way he was so gracious and how he handled everything; you'd hear it on the streets: people would say, "Jeez, I'm sorry I didn't vote for him," because now they saw the real man.

- Smith: Yeah. I think that must have been a source of frustration, particularly to people here who felt they knew him - that the rest of the country didn't see. Or they saw this caricature of Chevy Chase – all the bumbling.
- Mehney: And then I think the news made a big deal out of that. He was a star football player; you're not clumsy, being a star football player in the Big Ten.
- Smith: Did you have contacts with him after the presidency?
- Mehney: We always shared Christmas cards, and when he came to town, yes, we had contacts with him. I'm not one that pursues somebody and tries to hang on to their coattails. I respect their privacy and so we've always remained good friends. All the years, every time I'd see him, he'd bring up Steve and thought I'd saved his life. It was almost embarrassing to me. I didn't do anything anybody else wouldn't do. He was very, very appreciative of that and so was Betty. I knew Steve much more than his sister and his brothers, but I knew them a little bit. But Steve was special.
- Smith: Was Steve like his dad? He looks like his dad. He's almost a dead ringer for him in some ways at that age. But I wondered if he was in personality or temperament.
- Mehney: That's hard for me to answer.
- Smith: Were you involved at all when all of this [the Ford Museum] took place?
- Mehney: I was part of it, but a peon part of it. When we had the grand opening, I was in charge of the fireworks. I love fireworks. What kid doesn't like fireworks? You grow up loving fireworks. They gave me a budget and I can't remember, Zambelli or something like that – a big fireworks company out east, Pennsylvania or somewhere. I contacted three people and when I contacted them I said, "You know, this is for President Ford. I've got a ten thousand dollar budget, but I need thirty or forty thousand dollars worth of show. What can you do?" And I said, "I want to do something very, very unique for this." And we came up with; can you do a portrait of Jerry Ford in fireworks? And right across the river here, because a lot of the people are on this side of the river – we're shooting the fireworks from over by the building over there, so

everybody got a great view. And I'm in the pits with the people doing the fireworks, which was a thrill for me. And this thing was probably thirty yards wide and ten yards tall. It was a huge board. And they lit it off, and I can't remember if it was the ending or the beginning. I think it was maybe in the middle, whatever it was; they lit that up of Jerry Ford and I could just hear the ohhhs and ahhs, I wish I could have seen it. But I understand it was just gorgeous. It was a great big portrait of Jerry.

Smith: Was that the first time that fireworks on a large scale had been done downtown?

Mehney: That was number one. And now they have the annual one ever since then. They get four or five hundred thousand people down here every September. I can't come because its football night and I coach football for a high school. That's the only one I've ever been to.

Smith: Really?

Smith: Would you tell that story about the State Dinner - your conversation with the President?

Mehney: Okay, yes. When I was at the State Dinner, after dinner people were kind of moseying around. I was talking to Jerry for quite a long time, which I know doesn't happen because you've got to keep moving or whatever. I was talking to him ten-fifteen minutes. And a lot of it was – we got into the mural and all that sort of stuff, but just other things. Some people from the press realized it and they came up to me afterwards and they said, “We noticed you were with him for an extraordinarily long time. What were you talking about?” Well, I know what I wanted to tell them; but I didn't. I just said, “Well, we were just talking about the fact that the Michigan/Michigan State game is coming up and Jerry wants to go to that game but the Secret Service won't let him,” because that's after Squeaky or whatever her name was, after the shooting. “They wouldn't let him do that and he was kind of upset because he really wanted to see that game.” And that's the answer I gave the press, but really not what we talked about.

Smith: I assume that's the only White House State Dinner you've ever been to?

- Mehney: That's the only one I've ever been to. Probably the only one I'll ever be to.
- Smith: Pretty impressive, isn't it?
- Mehney: Oh, very impressive, and it's a real ego trip, really. It's very, very impressive to do that and see that. I don't remember all the people that were sitting at my table. I think Barbara Walters was there, but we had a good group of people. Henry Kissinger was there, and so you get a chance to meet a lot of these people.
- Smith: Do you remember the last time you saw him?
- Mehney: That I don't remember. On one of his trips to Grand Rapids.
- Smith: There was the ninetieth birthday that they did. I think that was his last trip back here. Were you surprised by the reaction at the time of his death?
- Mehney: You mean how...
- Smith: How much there was. Not only locally, but really, nationally.
- Mehney: I'm not surprised by it. But boy, it sure made me feel proud. And particularly when the ceremony was here and I was one of the lucky ones invited. And to see our town outpour the way they did for that man, it made me feel proud to be a Grand Rapids person. That was just incredible.
- Smith: There really never has been anything like it, has there? And probably won't be again.
- Mehney: No. My dad is an ophthalmologist, and Jerry was one of his patients and he used to always remind me that – and also Senator Vandenberg, who they thought was going to be president, was one of his patients – and he said, "You know, I took care of one president and almost did two." He bragged about it, he loved that. That was really something special.
- Smith: How do you think he should be remembered?
- Mehney: Well, actually he should be remembered, even though it was a short time, as one of our great presidents, because he came in at a very tough time, and he got the country back together again. And he put down unnecessary spending,

he vetoed a lot of things, he did all the things that had to be done. So even for a very short time, he did a whole lot. And probably because he was only there a couple of years, he won't go down to the kind of recognition he should get. Because not many people go into tough times like that and do what he did.

Smith: He was a true fiscal conservative, wasn't he?

Mehney: Yes.

Smith: I assume that is part of his legacy from Grand Rapids?

Mehney: Yeah. Grand Rapids is a very conservative town, and as you know, we're predominantly a Dutch town. They are a hard working, ethical people and they put a great foundation on this community that's still here today.

Smith: That's interesting.

Mehney: This is a great town. And thanks to the generations ahead of me, the icons, the DeVos', the Van Andels, the Meijers, the Cooks, the Pews, and there are a number of others, look what this town has done. What other town in this country have you seen like this and has what we have to offer.

Smith: It's true.

Mehney: And thanks to those families that give to this community, because they love the community.

Smith: And presumably, the decision to put this [museum] downtown was at least one of the catalysts for what followed and is still ongoing.

Mehney: There are a lot of catalysts and this is one; and when you look at the Meijer Gardens, this place, the [public] Museum, which is now down on the river and all that, there is life in our downtown.

Smith: It's funny – you wonder though, why it took a while for people to rediscover the river. The river really in many ways is the catalyst for a lot of this.

Mehney: Back in the old days, because we were the furniture capital, that's how they got a lot of their wood, through the barges from Lake Michigan – right downtown here. And of course, maybe one reason it took a long time is a lot

of the old factories were along the river and they were kind of trashy and all that. It just took time for somebody to have the foresight to redevelop it.

Smith: And what was down here before this place was built?

Mehney: I don't remember exactly what was right here at that time. But there were different older buildings over on this side.

Smith: We know that Fred Meijer offered some land on the outskirts of town for the site. But I guess President Ford felt pretty strongly about wanting it to be downtown.

Mehney: This was the right thing. I think the Grand Rapids Museum – the reason I'm a little aware of that is Peter Cook and I raised the money for the carousel.

Smith: Oh.

Mehney: And there again, Peter is one of my very close friends and he was also very close to Jerry. Peter and I had the last ride on that carousel. I think it came from Pennsylvania. And to watch Peter Cook riding that horse and singing away and having a ball was just precious.

Smith: There's a famous story about when the museum was dedicated, and the President and Mrs. Ford riding the carousel. Let's just say she took to it more naturally than he did.

Mehney: Yeah. And unfortunately, that carousel, or the museum went through a political nightmare as to where they were going to build it. People wanted it in different places and finally it prevailed where it is, and I'll tell you, it couldn't have been more perfect, either - that carousel out over the river and all that. Funny story about that, Mr. Frey, EJ Frey – he's another one of our icons, had done a lot for this community and of course, his kids are doing the same. And he bought one of the – what Peter and I did, we came up with ideas, we're going to sell these animals and you put your name on it, so you owned that animal. And that's how we paid for it. And Mr. Frey bought one, and this thing is going into turmoil, three or four years before they made a decision, and Mr. Frey called me. I'm good friends with his kids; I played football with John, his oldest son. And he called me and said, "Dave isn't there something

you can do to get this thing done? I want to see it in my lifetime.” I started to laugh and I said, “Mr. Frey, I’m a peon, you’re the icon, you’re the one that can get something done.” And the unfortunate thing is he did pass away before it was finished. He really wanted to see it, and I kind of felt bad for that. But then everything started, as you see now, Medical Mile and so forth is really making a difference, too.

Smith: Is there still a Dutch influence in this town?

Mehney: I would say there still is, but it’s probably not like it was fifty years ago. I mean, if you mowed your grass on Sunday in a Dutch neighborhood – that wasn’t the thing to do. That’s all kind of gone away.

Smith: We’ve heard wonderful stories about people who would buy the Sunday paper on Saturday night and not read it until Monday.

Mehney: Yeah.

Smith: Or paperboys who knew in Dutch neighborhoods, you didn’t throw the paper on the porch on Sunday, you hid it behind this tree or that barrel. Werner Viet told us when he started the Sunday paper he had a delegation of eight Christian Reform ministers call on him and get on their knees and pray for the worst of all sinners, the one who encourages sin in others.

Mehney: But that all slowly has changed. Just like when I was high school in the Fifties, the Christian High School was here, it’s a very good school. No dances, no movies, things like that. Of course, today they have it all, which is better.

Smith: We’ve talked to Rich DeVos at some length, and it’s interesting to listen to Rich, who I guess is trying to bring elements of the Church together. There are, I guess, divisions – and he’s really trying.

Mehney: I think that’s one of his crusades right now, and if anybody can do it, he can.

Smith: Well, that’s true.

Mehney: And he’s spot on, too. That’s the thing. I’m not a religious person, but I really strongly believe everybody should have the right to do what they want to do.

And to have some of the disasters that we have had in this world because of religion makes no sense to me.

Smith: Finally, what has this place meant to the community – the fact that it's here, that he's here, what does that mean to Grand Rapids?

Mehney: Oh, I think that's huge, in my opinion. Think it's huge the number of people who come to Grand Rapids and they go through this place. I don't know the numbers, you'll know the numbers, but this has got to be one of the more popular presidential sites in the country. We get a lot of people come to Grand Rapids and it's because of this, it's because of the whole thing – the Meijer Gardens, the museum, everything that's really been going on here. And in my opinion, this is part of it; Jerry is part of it; but also, our other leaders. You go to any city that's great, it's people like the ones that we have here that are willing to put back to make the city special. And this is a very special thing.

Smith: All you have to do is compare this side of the state with the other side of the state, or this city with any other city in Michigan.

Mehney: The people are very, very productive. Just to give you an example of this site, when Kawasaki bought me out they were going to move everything to Lincoln, Nebraska where they have a manufacturing plant - I was part of helping them find places back then. And the manufacturing plant is still there. And they were one of the very first companies to come over here and do that. They did that I think in the late Seventies, around '75-'76, to make certain motorcycles and jet skis and, at that time, also snowmobiles. And they looked all around and they settled there. But then when they bought me out, they were going to move everything to Lincoln, Nebraska. And I said, "No." I had two buildings side by side. I said, "No, I'll leave, you stay." That way I kept fifty jobs and I just moved next door.

Since then, because of the work ethic that we have in this community, all the other divisions, other than motorcycles, that's still located in California, but all their other divisions are right here in Grand Rapids. And that's because of the people and the work ethic. And so that says a lot about our community.

Smith: It does, indeed.

Mehney: They could have gone to Lincoln, they could have gone to California and they chose here and they are still here.

Smith: It also suggests one more reason why Gerald Ford was, in so many ways, emblematic of this community.

Mehney: Yeah.

Smith: A reflection of its values and outlook.

Mehney: The proof's in the pudding. You saw what he's done for this community and he's always come back and everything else. And I guess he could have been buried anywhere he wanted to be, and he picked Grand Rapids. That says it all.

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