

Gerald R. Ford Oral History Project
Fred Green
Interviewed by
Richard Norton Smith
June 23, 2010

Smith: First of all, thank you.

Green: You're welcome.

Smith: Tell us about you before your path crossed with Gerald Ford, and how that path happened to intersect with his.

Green: Well, I suppose our paths crossed relatively early on. I became pretty much a full-time resident of Vail engaged in the real estate development business in the late 1960s.

Smith: Describe Vail in the 60s.

Green: Well, Vail was a little village with unpaved streets, and in the spring water ran down in little streams right down the muddy streets. It was a very exciting place because it was brand new. You had to be half off your rocker to want to be here on any kind of a permanent basis because there were no services, there were no grocery stores, telephone services were interruptible, no television.

Smith: So you were pioneering.

Green: Yeah, we were out front.

Smith: And what was it about the place that made you see such potential? Geography?

Green: No, I'm not sure that I was here solely to realize the potential. I was here because I enjoyed being here. I was here because I found it exciting. I also found quite a bit of challenge here because, in the course of pioneering, there were lots of things to be done. Lots of infrastructure to be built, lots of housing to be constructed and my niche was real estate development. I came here as a real estate developer in the employ of a real estate developer, actually, and then branched out on my own and engaged in my own real estate

activities beginning in the late 1960s. By the time that Vail was launching in the early 70s, I was pretty thoroughly engaged on my own for my own account for developing real estate projects.

Smith: This is a speculative question, but I'm just curious. In today's environment or regulatory climate, could that happen again?

Green: Vail couldn't happen at all in today's regulatory climate. No, none of us would be here today. This wouldn't happen.

Smith: Congressman Ford had a condominium?

Green: He did. I did not really know the Fords early on. Our paths didn't substantially cross until after I had created a real estate development called Eagle Vail, which was halfway between Vail and Beaver Creek. I built a golf course there and it was through that golf activity that I came to meet and know President Ford.

Smith: Was he in office at the time or was this after he left the White House?

Green: He was in office at the time.

Smith: I imagine the President of the United States showing up is going to be a big deal.

Green: It was a big deal.

Smith: And somewhat disruptive.

Green: Especially for this little place, it was a big deal, yeah. But there was a fondness for Gerald Ford the man, the person. He was seen as one of us, if you will. Much the same with Betty. Those _____ we got to know.

Smith: And did that communicate itself more or less instantly, that personal quality, or was it something that built up over time?

Green: I think there were really two stages of it. One was that, if you hadn't met or become familiar with the President, you'd heard that he was a pretty good fellow. And then on some occasion, we met and we seemed to hit it off like

he did with so many other people, very much one-on-one, seeming to have known each other for years and then joined one's company. It was a great time. And that was initially in the context of golf on a golf club that I had built. So, we were very honored, too, of course, to have the President come by and play golf. And we actually played on that little golf course called Eagle Vail. We played some kind of a little golf tournament and I can't remember what the name of it was, but it became the precursor of the Gerald Ford Invitational. The following year, we wrapped it up and packaged it as the Jerry Ford Invitational and then we went on for another 20 years like that. I then went on to build other golf clubs around Vail and, of course, the President loved to play golf and we extended that relationship into those other golf courses and clubs. Through that association, through _____ that association in the desert in the wintertime and through the tournament, we came to know each other quite well.

Smith: What kind of golfer was he?

Green: A very good average golfer. Powerful. When he made the best swing he could make, he hit the ball a long way. He didn't have the opportunity to play a lot of golf. He was a mid-teen handicap sort of player. Enjoyed the game very much.

Smith: To non-golfers, it's a little bit like opera. You see passionate devotees but, not being part of it yourself, you don't fully understand what it is that makes them passionate. What is it about golf that he, and others, found so enjoyable?

Green: Well, I think it's several things. First of all, a golf swing is a very complicated maneuver. At the end of the day, the object of the swing is to have a golf club meet the ball on the right plane at the right speed and at the right angle, and having at the same time immediately before that, having the club head travel quite a distance around, behind and down. So it's a complicated maneuver. When it's executed properly, it gives you a sense of accomplishment. And when it's executed improperly, it gives you a sense of wanting to do better, wanting to master it. You know you can master it

because everyone hits good shots some of the time. And we all become convinced that we can do that all the time. So what captivates us is that progression from some of the time to all of the time.

Smith: Well put. We've heard from a number of people that the conversations on the course, whatever they were about, were not about business - that it is an opportunity to clear your head.

Green: Not necessarily. No, we would occasionally play golf and talk about business subjects or talk about politics, but it was in a light sort of way. It wasn't a consuming sort of discussion. It wasn't a negotiation. Maybe the expression of some opinions or the asking of a question or an observation about an occurrence or whatever.

Smith: He had a temper. Did you ever see it on the course?

Green: Not often, but you'd see it. It was very, very well controlled. I would say that, well, we played a lot of golf together. I couldn't tell you how much golf we played together, but it was quite a bit and I would say that he honestly, truly, really lost his temper once in all that. Many times frustrated, many times angry, but under control.

Smith: And is it anger directed against yourself for missing something?

Green: Yeah, it's an anger at one's failure.

Smith: Never wrapped a club around a tree or anything like that?

Green: No. Very fun. Joked a lot. No.

Smith: What were his weaknesses as a golfer?

Green: He was not a great player. You've probably heard this before or read it.

Smith: It's not the first time I've heard it.

Green: Yeah, it was sort of a known concerning the President's golf that he was what we would kind of a yippee player. Yippee means the face of the golf club has a little bit of a wobble in it and it's very hard to get back on the ball square, to

get it lined. He worked very hard at that. He would get very frustrated sometimes missing a short putt, a foot and a half, two feet, and we'd give him a lot of putts, we all did.

Have you ever played?

Smith: No.

Green: If we had a real match going, even the President had to make a putt and every now _____. Then he'd insist that he play and he'd miss it and he'd get very frustrated at that.

Smith: And he obviously had the opportunity to play with the pros.

Green: Oh, sure.

Smith: There was the semi-famous game with Jack Nicklaus and Bill Clinton in which I guess President Clinton chose to interpret the rules somewhat liberally.

Green: Yeah. They played at the country club at the Rockies that day. I was actually on the golf course when they did it.

Smith: Were you?

Green: Mhmm.

Smith: Were there golfers who were his friends? I mean, players with recognizable names?

Green: Professional players?

Smith: Professional players who were his friends.

Green: Yes, I would say so. Yeah, a number of courses with Jack Nicklaus over the years. Covered the Rockies would be a good example and we played a lot. I'll never forget, one day I was walking along with Jack, we were designing a golf course at that time, and we were talking about the Jerry Ford Invitational golf tournament and I made some observation to the effect that it's something

that had a lot of promise as raising charitable funds for charitable purposes. And Jack made the comment that, "You know, this is going to last as long as the President lives and plays in it. When he ceases to play in the golf tournament, then it's over because we're all coming because of him. We're not coming because we have any financial opportunity here" even though they did make a little money doing it. They came because of him.

Smith: Were you surprised when he decided at the end of 20 years to shut it down?

Green: No, I wasn't. I think it was time. The golf professionals that had sort of started with us in the tournament had gotten past their prime. The newer guys didn't really know the President and they didn't know any of us very well. So, it was sort of a generational thing. It lasted for that 20 year span, if you will, of our generation and professional golfers of our generation. When that sort of came to an end and the President really ceased to be able to play what he would consider to be a worthy game, then I think he very correctly said, "You know, that's enough. We're done."

Smith: I've wondered, because he was cognizant of getting older and he was a proud man in the best sense of the word. But he'd also seen, out in the desert, Bob Hope's later years, and I've wondered sometimes whether he wasn't influenced in a sense that, "That's not something I want to repeat."

Green: I think, when we actually came to an end of the Jerry Ford Invitational, he was still playing the Bob Hope with Hope. They were still playing golf. I think after that time, he was still playing and we still played some golf after that together.

Smith: How long did you play? How late?

Green: I would guess we last played golf together in the desert in the late 90s, I would say.

Smith: He still obviously enjoyed the game?

Green: Yeah, he liked to play, to get up a game, and every now and then, he'd ask Penny to call me and say, "Do you want to play some golf?" And it got to so

all we did was nine holes. You know, in the last golf that we played together, it would've been nine holes. He wouldn't want to go the whole eighteen.

Smith: How would you describe the roles that the Fords played in this community? One senses that they were very active, very visible, in both the desert and here. And obviously there are institutions here with their names on it. How does that reflect their activities in the public or civic sphere?

Green: Well, I think that there are several planes on which they had an important influence. A very indirect influence was their simple presence here because the presence of that notable a person who decided to take up partial year residence in this little community in those days said something about who we were. That was very important. That had an impact on the restaurateurs who were doing business at night and how many people came into their establishments. It had impact on me as a real estate developer. People wanted to come to a place where the President went in the summertime. People wanted to play on the courses that I built because the President played them. So there was that indirect role.

On a direct basis, of course, he was a terrific enabler of money-raising in various forms. The Gerald Ford Invitational, one of them, other several ski races that were established under his aegis, if you will, that raised a lot of money locally. So, there was a pretty much continuous stream of fund-raising that went on and an improvement of this community as a direct result of his willingness to go beyond the indirect and directly to influence specific activities.

Smith: I remember hearing them talk about the chapel that was built here.

Green: That was mostly Firestone's doing. I think they made a contribution to it. In fact, I'm pretty sure they did and I think it was pretty significant, but I think that was more Leonard's project than theirs.

Smith: Tell us about Leonard Firestone because he was clearly very close to them and integral in the formation of the Betty Ford Center. I guess they were neighbors as well in both communities.

Green: Well, Leonard was a very good friend of mine and we were very close together. Again, initially, I got to know Leonard through President Ford. He'd bring Leonard along and we'd all play golf together. Later on, Leonard was very instrumental in getting me into the Betty Ford Center for a little 30-day stay. And after that we became very, very close friends. I was married at Leonard's house in Carmel. We had all sorts of social engagements over the years. Became very good friends.

Smith: I've been told he was pretty self-effacing. It's the Betty Ford Center, not the Leonard Firestone Center.

Green: Yeah. Leonard always thought there was only one way to get something done and that was the correct way and if his view of the correct way was different than Betty's or somebody else's, then that other way was wrong. He was always sure he was right. I don't think he'd mind me saying that. And quite often, frankly, he was.

Smith: Had alcohol been a lifelong problem for him?

Green: It had been a problem for some number of years and I think he had to deal with it on several occasions through his lifetime.

Smith: When you were at the Betty Ford Center, did you see her there?

Green: Yeah. Of course, I knew her by then and she kind of dodged me, frankly.

Smith: Was it awkward?

Green: A little, yeah. There was a point, as I recall, when you're being sort of indoctrinated there and you go to someplace and there she is. In those days, I don't think she did that for a long time, but this was in the very first years of the Betty Ford Center. This was 25, 26, 27 years ago. And she saw me and, you know, she just kind of didn't, and I didn't want to be too familiar. But she was watching out for me.

Smith: She was very much hands-on with that center. It was never just a name.

Green: Very much so. Very much so.

- Smith: And he was so proud of her. She got the Medal of Freedom before he did. She got several forms of recognition, and the story is told that the Center has an annual alumni day and you could see the former President cooking hot dogs.
- Green: I've never attended those events, but I'm not surprised at all. He was very proud of it. And, of course, she did her own golf tournament and he would support that very actively.
- Smith: And was that done in the desert?
- Green: Uh-huh.
- Smith: She never played, did she?
- Green: No. But the ladies tour, female pros, would go through the desert and the Monday after the Dinah Shore Golf Tournament, they would do the Betty Ford Invitational. It was just like the Jerry Ford Invitational. The same kind of format except it was a one-day, go-for-it kind of thing. It was a lot of fun and I think it raised some significant money. Leonard's view always was that we should not bother to go play golf. We should just give him the money and forget about it.
- Smith: Let me ask you one thing. A classic sort of opposites attracting - obviously every successful marriage entails illogic in some ways. He was such a stickler for punctuality and she was the opposite. Did you ever see that?
- Green: I don't think I ever really was exposed to that. No. Can't say that I was.
- Smith: So, you obviously knew both of them years before her intervention which was in '78.
- Green: I knew both of them before that, but not well and, especially, not her well before that, more so coming into the early 80s, '81, '82, '83, '84. Around there.
- Smith: I wouldn't expect you would know the answer to this, but I'm curious. There had been some talk in '79, early '80, about him running again. I don't think it

was terribly serious, but they went through the motions of talking to people. The sense that we get is that one reason why it wasn't terribly serious was because Mrs. Ford wouldn't let it become terribly serious. This was just a year or so after her intervention and they had a good life. And, why go back even if you could?

Green: I don't have any personal recollection of her role in that decision. I have no doubt that there was a role.

Smith: During those years his relationship with Jimmy Carter turned around and they became good friends. I've often thought one of the determining factors may have been that they both ran against Ronald Reagan. That's something they had in common. Did he ever talk about his successors?

Green: He was pretty close-mouthed about that. He would talk a lot more about his team in the White House and how they functioned, but he really didn't talk much about the opposition. He didn't talk much about his predecessors or successors.

Smith: Didn't talk about Nixon?

Green: No. I don't think I ever heard him talk about Nixon.

Smith: Lots of politicians love to gossip. My sense was that he not only didn't do it, but he would find a graceful way to change the subject when there were people who were doing it. I don't mean political gossip, such as electoral speculation, I mean gossip gossip, their personal lives and the like.

Green: I think that's probably pretty accurate.

Smith: Do you think he took secrets with him to the grave?

Green: I don't know. I guess history will probably guess. Don't know.

Smith: What did they enjoy? Obviously golf, but what did they do when they were here? Did they have close friends?

Green: They had a number of close friends. I would say that their friends were divided into maybe at least three different categories. One would be people who had been close to them in raising money, either for political purposes or for the Betty Ford Center or for other activities. There was another set that would've been the local community. And then there was the political set from the past. But, out of all those sets, there were lots of friends. And they were very, very kind and good about giving dinner parties and inviting very interesting people. Yeah, we had some wonderful nights up in that house.

Smith: I haven't been up there. Describe the house.

Green: One of the things I remember is that his office was very small. I always wondered really how small it was. I mean, it was not big. It was a wonderful house for entertaining. It had a very nice living room with a great view and a large dining room just off the living room. It was very comfortable house. It was on multiple levels, which was not particularly good as one gets older and I don't remember if it had an elevator in it or not. It probably did, but I don't remember whether it did. Nice house.

Smith: And they could have the kids there.

Green: Plenty of room. Yeah. And, of course, Leonard and Dean were right next door.

Smith: Tell us about Dean because the name comes up frequently and it's not a name known generally. We've had someone here today, actually, make the observation that they thought that he was a significant influence on President Ford.

Green: I think he had President Ford's ear. Dean was a very intelligent man. He devoted a lot of energy during his life to raising money for political purposes for campaigns and did so for the Ford campaign as well. He knew a lot of people and he was the kind of person, I think, that you would describe as one that had good judgment. If you had an issue and were close and you wanted to have another view, you might ask Dean what he thought. That kind of guy. And just all around great fellow. Good guy. Dean was another very close

friend of mine through President Ford, but we became very close friends over the years.

Smith: And I assume Mrs. Ford had her own sort of circle of friends?

Green: You know, I never really observed that much. She did, but I never saw it really in play very actively. I would see more of that in the desert, frankly, during the winters than I would here in Vail in the summertime. I didn't really keep track of her very well, what she did during the day. I know that she would spend a fair amount of time with Shaika Gramschammer(?) and a circle of friends, but I don't know how much time.

Smith: How many folks had this dual existence of the desert in the winter and Vail in the summer? Was it an accident?

Green: The crux of that seemed to be those of us that had a pretty active role in creating that golf tournament. It would've evolved out of the relationships we had of course with the Fords, but then there was Kaiser Morcus who had a place out in the desert, as well. In the earlier days, you know, we'd just go out there for long weekends and one thing or another and play some golf and have a good time and come back to Vail and spend our winters. It was only in the later years, coming into the mid-90s, I guess, and after that, that some of us actually lived out there part of the winter and had more active times. Bob Barrett was out there in the winter. Leonard was out there. And between Leonard and Barrett scheming to get up golf games and one thing or another, they'd call and say, "Why don't you guys come out and we'll have a golf outing of some kind?" and often the President would join in.

Smith: I don't want to put this the wrong way. Had Leonard Firestone ever worked a job?

Green: I guess so. I never saw him do it, but yeah.

Smith: I know he had diplomatic appointments and all that, but I just didn't know whether he had a career in the sense that you and I would define the term.

- Green: I think in the sense that you and I would call a career, I think probably not. But I think at one time in his earlier life, he did have some kind of role with the company. I'm not sure exactly what that was.
- Smith: Let me ask you something. I remember in my eulogy in Grand Rapids making reference to the fact that, for most of us, the stereotype is that we get a little more conservative as we get older, whether it's because we have more to conserve or because nostalgia takes hold or whatever. And with the Fords that didn't seem to be the case. He was always a fiscal conservative. He clearly was very traditional in his approach, vetoing bills as President, and some debate over just how generous or ungenerous a tipper he was on or off the golf course. But aside from economics, on social issues, for example, is it your sense the Republican party was just moving further and further to the Right and the Fords just stayed where they were and looked relatively more 'liberal.' Or did they in fact become more liberal? And was she an influence in that regard? I'm thinking, quite frankly, whether the experience of alcoholism and the compassion that they had for good people who had a weakness affected their broader view of things - whether it was abortion, or more recently gay rights, things where by the end of their lives they stood apart from the rest of the Republican Party?
- Green: I think that they became separated intellectually from the party line. I think that as time passed in the 80s and in the early 90s, he became one of very independent judgment, unrelated to Republican Party policy.
- Smith: Which is interesting because he'd spent a lifetime as a party man.
- Green: But, you know, there's a point where you don't have to do that anymore. I think he was a great team guy. When he was on the team, he played the team's game, very much so. But I think when he was beyond that, that he very freely exercised independent judgment.
- Smith: You also wonder how much her views affected his views. Then you figure that they had kids that were still relatively young, and then grandchildren.

That's got to be a factor in terms of exposing them to different points of view than if they'd sat at the country club seven days a week.

Green: I don't have any real useful knowledge about what her influence was on his views post-presidential periods. Don't know.

Smith: How difficult was it for him to come to terms with aging?

Green: You know, I don't think that he had a particularly difficult time with it. He seemed to me to be no different than everybody else. I mean, everybody has some level of acceptance to have to go through to get the fact that you're getting older and you can't quite function in certain ways. But I never noticed that he seemed to be particularly hung up about it.

Smith: He seemed to have really very good health until he was about 90. I think when the doctors said, "You've got to really cut back on your travel", that was difficult for him because he obviously loved it. It'd been a significant part of his life. But it's interesting that they insisted, against their doctors' wishes, on coming up here those last couple summers when maybe the more prudent thing to do would've been to go somewhere without this altitude.

Green: It might have been more for her benefit, really, than his. I never got the sense that he was particularly uncomfortable being here. He may have been.

Smith: In terms of health, those last couple summers, you didn't sense that he was having a particularly difficult time?

Green: Not sure that I do, but I never sensed it.

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

Green: Quite well. I called one day to see if he'd like to have lunch in the desert and we chatted about the possibility, I think, and put it off to another day. I think I said, "I'll call back and we'll talk about another period." So I called a bit later and Penny said, "Actually, what he'd like to do is he'd like to take you to dinner." We wound up going to dinner to his favorite restaurant out in the desert.

Smith: What was it? Do you remember?

Green: The restaurant? Jillian's. He loved that place. And so we went out to dinner. This would've been in April.

Smith: Of that last year.

Green: Of that last year, yeah. And we went out to dinner and typically I recall that as it got along towards what you might think would be the end of the evening, he just kind of said, "That's enough. Let's go home." I think he got tired.

Smith: But he was still mentally sharp?

Green: Yeah, yeah. Yeah, he was good.

Smith: Were you surprised by the amount of reaction when he passed? He was someone who had not been in the public eye nationally for quite some time. There seemed to be a very significant, very genuine kind of outpouring.

Green: No, I wasn't surprised. He had a great following. I think he was the kind of man, the kind of leader, who was sufficiently 'of the people that we all felt that we were part of what he was. You don't get that feeling about a number of leaders.

Smith: No, that's very well put. Plus, you know, in some ways, time was very good to him. You stop and think, poor Lyndon Johnson died a day before the Vietnam peace agreement was announced and President Ford lived long enough to know that most people had come around to his way of thinking on the pardon, for example. The Profiles in Courage award - when he received it from the Kennedys, he said, "For 20 years, everywhere I go, people ask the same question. And since I got that award, they stopped asking."

Green: I've never heard that. That's good.

Smith: The imprimatur of the Kennedys.

Final thing, can you think of a story or observation or anything that might say something about Gerald Ford that people might find surprising? A quality or trait?

Green: That's interesting. I can't think of a single occasion where I could point to some activity that we engaged in where I could say that that was different than the substance of our total relationship.

Smith: We talked about him being a fiscal conservative. That's the public word for it. The private word is frugal-to-tight. For example, on the golf course, he was not known for generous tips, to the point where it was kind of an inside joke among some of those who knew him.

Green: Well, yeah, it was conservative, but it wasn't off-line. I can tell you one thing that would show you something of the nature there. A couple of years in a row, the President put his name on a ski race of some kind that was in Beaver Creek. The ski race had associated with it a Calcutta of some kind, which is a betting format where you could put down wagers on the teams that were racing and had the potential to win some significant money. And I put together a system of grading these teams such that I somehow wound up winning a significant amount of money. The beneficiary of this ski race was the Vail Hospital. The hospital was going broke at the time, out of money, out of cash, literally, on the verge of going under. And as I recall, in this Calcutta deal I won about \$20,000. So we all got together for a big dinner and there were, I don't know, several hundred people there. And Bob Barrett gets up to announce who won various things and I had told him in advance that I would just leave my winnings on the table and let it go to the benefit of the hospital. And so Barrett took advantage of that and announced that first. Then several other people who had won something in this deal, when it came to them, they said, "Oh, I'll do the same thing." And a couple of them were people that really could've used the money. And I think the President thought that they'd sort of had their arm twisted too hard and he was a little upset about that. It wound up raising \$100,000 through the forgiveness of these winnings in this Calcutta thing. It was great for the hospital because it kind of

saved the day for the hospital for awhile. But the President kind of frowned on it in the sense that he thought that some of those people that won some of that money really needed it themselves and were not the kind of people who should be making substantial contributions to hospitals. I mean, there was a line there, a fiscal line.

Smith: How do you think he should be remembered?

Green: Well, I think he should be remembered as unique in his presidency in the sense that he had to navigate an extremely difficult path, one for which there was no victory and a substantial probability of high criticism. He did it honorably and he did it in a way that the country accepted it. And I think very few people could've carried that off. That's how I remember it.

Smith: Perfect. Thank you.

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