

Gerald R. Ford Oral History Project
Gordon VanderTill
Interviewed by
Richard Norton Smith
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Smith: Let me just throw one out from left field. Tell us something surprising about Gerald Ford, something that people who think they know him might be surprised to learn. Character traits, or anything.

VanderTill: A couple of things come to mind immediately - his forgiving nature. It's not easy to make stupid mistakes, I've done a few and I know that on one or two occasions, I really did stupid things. I got caught up in the heat of the moment and he forgave me for that. He didn't come right and say, "Gordon, I'll forgive you for that." But we just passed it right by.

Smith: How did you know you were forgiven?

VanderTill: Everything just went on as it had been. He didn't make me do penance or anything like that. But I realized what I had done was really stupid. You know when you really screw up, and I did. I thought this is a real man who forgives me like that. I always had a great deal of respect for Mr. Ford - or Jerry. But when he forgave me for my transgression, I knew what a man he really was. Some people would beat the tar out of you if you screwed up like I had done.

Smith: Particularly powerful people in a position of authority.

VanderTill: Right. And he was an ordinary human being. And I loved him for that.

Smith: When did you first meet?

VanderTill: That's a question that I don't think I have any idea - except that I know we came to talk at one time at a meeting in Grand Rapids for the Republican conference. It was going to be a meeting, I think, in one of the areas that was open for Republican people who met for whatever was going on at the state conference. I knew that I had talked to Frank Meyer and he said, "Now, Gordon, Mr. Ford wants to talk with you, about maybe he wants you to come to work for him." I said, "That's really interesting." Since I just had my

degree from the U of M, a master's degree, I said, "Yes, I'd be glad to talk to him. How are we going to arrange this?" So I went to talk with him. I'd known who Jerry Ford was for a long time. I had no idea how much money – where, how, whatever – a whole bunch of things. And so we had a chance to sit down and talk. So that was my first real opportunity to sit down and kick some ideas around with him.

Smith: And what was your background that led you to that encounter?

VanderTill: My encounter that led to that, I think, was when I was a student at Calvin College. That year, every year, there would be an award available to a senior level student for what Jerry Ford called the Ford Workshop in Politics, a little twist on the words. It was kind of fun. I was looking for work because I was married and didn't know what I was going to do next, etc. So I talked to my instructor in political science, Joe Westra, and I said, "What's this thing about a Ford Workshop in Politics? What's this thing about?" He said, "Boy, that's a lucky thing if you could get that." I said, "Well, what's that?" He said, "Well, it's really very simple. You have to be approved by the president of the college and I have to recommend you to the president of the college. Then if they approve, it goes to Mr. Ford and then he makes a decision yes or no. Yes, you'd be okay and then you'd come to Washington, D.C. and then you'd work there and you get paid for two months. I'd been working in the grocery store for years. How wonderful, what a gift! It was like a gift from God.

Smith: Was that your first trip to DC?

VanderTill: That was not my first trip to DC, but it was my first working job. And I had been to DC as a kid. My parents were patriotic people; we had gone to Washington, DC on a trip out to the East Coast and we had stopped out there. I don't remember all the details of that, it's been several decades. And so I talked to my wife and I said that I might have a chance to get paid in this. We decided I would talk to Mr. Ford during the state political conference, and then we'll talk about whatever. And so we talked. Mr. Ford said, "Well, you know, you're going to have to get to Washington on your own, and after that you'll have to find a place to lodge for a while.

If the president of the school recommends you, then you will be the summer student.” President Spoelhof, who just passed away about ten days ago, was the president of the college and recommended me. A great man, by the way. So that got done and fortunately for me, the previous summer school I had met a fellow by the name of Bos, B-O-S was his last name. Ronald Bos and his wife Myrna, and they were from the suburban Maryland area, he was a teacher and we had sort of been friendly, like for lunch, or we’d have coffee together. And Ron had said to me one time, “You know, sometime you ought to come see us in Washington.” He knew I was interested in political science and one thing and another. So I called him up and said, “Guess what, Ron? I’m going to Washington.” And I got to stay with the family for a couple of weeks.

Smith: When was this?

VanderTill: Oh, this would have been about 1966, approximately.

Smith: Was he House Minority Leader by that point?

VanderTill: I believe Ford was, yes.

Smith: What did you see of him that summer?

VanderTill: Well, I saw him when I walked in and said, “Hi, I’m Gordon VanderTill.” We shook hands. He said, “Now, Frank is going to give you some idea on things he wants to have done.” Frank Meyer.

Smith: Was he the AA?

VanderTill: AA? Yes, Frank was the AA, and so we talked and sat down. He showed me where I would have a desk, H230. I’ll never forget those offices. Beautiful spot, looks out over the mall.

Smith: Now, is this in the Capitol building, itself?

VanderTill: In the Capitol, yes. H230.

Smith: Because it was the Minority Leader’s office you were in? You weren’t in a constituent office, his Michigan office.

VanderTill: No, I was right across the hall from the House Foreign Affairs office, and there were a few other students out there from – I don't think they were from Calvin – but there were other students who had come and applied to be summer students. There was a gang of boys and girls, so to speak, and we were busy writing letters to individuals who had written to the Congressman.

Smith: Now, I take it answering the mail was a religious duty. It was a top priority.

VanderTill: Frank Meyer had quite a presence, yes. He was an incredible man.

Smith: Tell us about him.

VanderTill: He was about your size, as I mentioned when you came in. He was originally from the Grand Haven area, had taught at, I think, the Christian school system there. One of the things I found out from Frank as I had gotten to know him a little bit; he told me a little story about what happened when he had finally been offered a chance, an opportunity, to become Ford's AA in Washington. Frank said, "Yes, it was really something to hear about. Some of the little old ladies from the church were there after the services in the morning, and they were talking about you, Frank." "Oh," said Frank, "is that so?" He was very humble, by the way. He said, "Oh, I hope they said something good." Well, we chuckled. And then one of the little Dutch ladies said, "You know, I heard that Frank Meyer now is going to go work for Congressman Ford in Washington, DC. Can't you imagine such an outlandish, astounding event?" "Oh, yes," said the woman, "I've known Frank a long time. He was such a fine Christian man." And Frank just burst out laughing about these comments about him, not that he didn't take Christianity seriously, because he did. But he thought, what a connection, he *used* to be such a fine, Christian man and now he's in government. And, in fact, that was sort of the way the Dutch people used to be.

Smith: That's interesting. We'll do a detour because part of this is trying to get a sense of the political culture that produced Gerald Ford. Clearly it's a culture that is largely gone, or certainly transformed. We're trying to get a sense of just how pervasive the Dutch influence was in this area; how it manifested itself politically and otherwise.

- VanderTill: Well, I really can't speak for all of them, but the people were always interested in politics and government, it seemed like. But it's nothing that you should ever make into any kind of career, whatsoever. And you probably shouldn't go to Washington, DC, to the wicked city. To live there? Probably not even a Christian Reformed Church there.
- Smith: We've been told about backsliders who on a Saturday night, would go out and buy the Sunday paper. They wouldn't read it until Monday.
- VanderTill: Oh, they'd buy it on Saturday. Bob Vander Laan and I would go out to Seymour Square Saturday evening. Yes. Actually, a little before that, but late in the day, so they wouldn't have to buy the Sunday paper. Of course, Bob was a state senator then and he was sort of a godfather to me as far as getting me involved in government and politics and one thing and another.
- Smith: Presumably their conservatism was financial.
- VanderTill: Oh yes.
- Smith: And that dovetailed neatly – Ford was always a fiscal conservative.
- VanderTill: True.
- Smith: He did fit in very neatly with that prevailing culture?
- VanderTill: I would say so, that he would; it was a good fit.
- Smith: Because I wonder, over time, and as his horizons broadened, and as he became more and more of a national figure, you have sense of him – well, look, he came home from the war and took on this entrenched moss-back, who was the quintessence of isolationism.
- VanderTill: He was a Christian Reform moss-back, Sherman St. Reformed Church.
- Smith: And, indeed, it has been convincingly argued that the reason he didn't marry Mrs. Ford before the primary was because of the political ramifications of marrying a divorcee.

- VanderTill: She was probably a dancer and a cover girl and all those other things. By the same token, I think you have to look at Jerry's parents; Jerry Ford, Sr. and, of course, Jerry's real mom. And I think that was a moderating influence.
- Smith: How so? That's interesting.
- VanderTill: Well, you know, Senior and Jerry's mom were very tight. And they loved each other very much. If the divorce was a bad thing, then there are all kinds of things that are bad. And the fact that they lived the way that they did, as well as they did, and the way that they worked together and worked out their marriage and the other children, and the respect that was shown to Jerry and the other brothers, and the way Dad treated them all the same, was a moderating influence against the big prohibition against divorce.
- Smith: When you stop to think, after all, his mother had gotten a divorce.
- VanderTill: Well, because she was treated very poorly.
- Smith: Did he ever talk about that?
- VanderTill: No. I have read about it, but only very limited, and it's a very personal thing. I have also been through divorce a couple of times. It's a difficulty in the Dutch Reformed area. Probably not so much today as we do presently.
- Smith: One senses that he may have very well gotten his interest in politics from his dad. Wasn't his father politically active?
- VanderTill: Yes. I think he was the chairman of the local party.
- Smith: And wasn't he anti-Frank McKay? Wasn't that part of the dynamic?
- VanderTill: Frank who?
- Smith: Tell us about Frank McKay. He has a building named after him in Grand Rapids.
- VanderTill: Yes. I read a book one time, quite by accident, at the U of M and it was about Frank D. McKay. He was referred to as "The Boss" and he was probably a little bit like in the case of Harry Truman. Very similar boss control situation there. And Frank McKay was thought of as "The Boss." He was in charge of

the politics and the real irony of the whole thing was that when Ford, Jr., or Junie as they used to call him – I never called him Junie – the decision that he was going to run for Congress against the Hollander...

Smith: Bartel Jonkman.

VanderTill: Bartel J-O-N-K-M-A-N. Well, when Ford decided to run against Bartel, I suspect that it may have been a little bit against Gerald R Ford, Sr.'s wishes, what his son was doing. As a matter of respect to Gerald Ford, Sr., Jerry Ford used to on all his official statements, letters and responses, signed as Gerald R. Ford, Jr., out of respect to his parents, and to his dad especially. After his father passed away he dropped using the Jr.

Smith: Were they close?

VanderTill: Senior and junior? Yes, I would say so, although I did not look at that in great depth on that, but, to me, yes. And the other - Jerry's real father who came to visit at a diner in the South High area where Jerry was working as a bus boy-diner. We've all heard some instances. Jerry, Jr. never had much respect for or time for the other man – Jerry's father – natural born father, I guess would be the right way to say it. There was a major dismissal of that whole thing. It seems as though the man came to see his son, to make sure his son was doing okay. And then that was it. That was about the way it went. And Gerald, Senior and Gerald, Junior seemed to have a very close relationship.

Smith: What do you think he got from his mother? I'll preface that by the famous story where she literally died in a church pew on a Sunday morning. And when they went back to her place, they found her calendar, her datebook, filled for the next month, or something like that.

VanderTill: I'm not aware of that, no. But I'm not sure I totally understand your question.

Smith: Well, there are people who see his drive and ambition, and they saw that in his mother.

VanderTill: Yes. That one thing is apparent if you go back to any of the Ford papers, and all the papers that were kept, and if you look back to the days when Ford had sufficient staff to run the operation when he was Minority Leader, he had

George Willis, I think, was the man who took care of all the papers and kept the scrapbooks. It was very important to Gerald R. Came right off his mother's page. And that was done, as far as I know, forever on the Ford staff. It was a trait that Jerry always kept. It was not a matter of ego; it was a matter of record.

Smith: That's interesting.

VanderTill: I was surprised initially when I worked as a summer intern, to encounter this. I said, "How come he's doing that?" Well, it makes sense. If somebody is going to quote you better have it written down.

Smith: We all know he wanted to be Speaker of the House.

VanderTill: Yes.

Smith: How burning a desire was that? And how frustrating was it to fall short? Is it why he went on the road all those nights and made all those speeches and ate all those rubber chicken dinners? Was it all because he wanted to be Speaker?

VanderTill: I was on a Ford campaign trip with him one time, and we went out west.

Smith: Was he still in the House?

VanderTill: He was in the House. Trying to build members, looking for a way to continue to build the majority. He was not looking to become Speaker, persae, but to make sure that the Republican perspective was going to have some clearance. I think that was always in his mind about being Speaker. God bless us, we could have had Nancy Pelosi instead. Oh, my.

Smith: What was the trip like? What was he like on the road? Was he different at all on the road from back in the office?

VanderTill: No. He was an ordinary guy. Wonderful man. We were on a private airplane from Grand Rapids. We left on a Sunday morning; we were on our way to Montana, as I recall. I don't remember the numbers, they had one term and they were looking to get back in again. The plane had no plumbing facilities inside and I had way too much coffee that morning to get on the plane. When we got off the plane I thought I was going to bust right open. That was an

incredible trip. We were also in New Mexico on that trip and a couple of other states out there in the west.

Smith: You learn a lot about people when you travel with them.

VanderTill: Especially if you don't have a commode.

Smith: What did you learn about Jerry Ford?

VanderTill: I have been able to expand the level of knowledge which I have used several times over in dealing with the people who thought Jerry Ford was clumsy and fell down the steps of the Air Force One. And I said, "Listen, now I have traveled with this man and I can tell you he's going to be carrying a briefcase. In his briefcase you'll find a pipe or two, there will be some tobacco in there, and a package of Clorets gum. Clorets gum. Well, you know, Mr. Ford liked to have a little drink. He would have maybe a little bit of – I don't remember what his favorite was anymore. But he'd have a little snifter. And he'd have some smoke on the pipe. And I said, if you watch that film on what happened when Ford fell down those steps coming out of Air Force One, he didn't have any problem that he was clumsy. He said, "What do you mean?" I said, "Well, the reason was that he stumbled was that he'd had a little snifter. He wanted to have a little whiskey and he didn't want it on his breath because he didn't want to offend people with it on his breath. And he knew that if he smoked his pipe that would make his breath smell also. And he got down to the bottom step and that was it, the one he missed." And I had a chance to try that with several people. He was not clumsy. He was very solid. Fact is, we played football. The campaign of 1970, I think – still had a pretty good arm, in fact.

Smith: And that was the presidential campaign.

VanderTill: No, this was at South Field and we did some video cassette work with young people talking about Vietnam.

Smith: '72 maybe?

VanderTill: May have been '70, yes. Ford was still very good, very adroit. Very athletic and in good shape.

Smith: Was he good with young people?

VanderTill: Yes, very much. We had one guy we didn't like a whole bunch. He name was Maki. I don't know if you are acquainted with that. Are you acquainted with that story?

Smith: No.

VanderTill: Oh, my gosh. This was when we were at 425 Cherry, which was where the Ford office was. And we had a few rabble-rousers in town, young people who were anti-Vietnam, anti-war, anti-anti-anti, etc.

Smith: And presumably anti-Ford?

VanderTill: Yes. We were working in the Grand Rapids office and Ford was there and Trix Tikenberg was there. Do you remember Trix? No you don't remember Trix. She was one of our secretaries. She should be mentioned. One week before Jerry was there, we got a call from the police department. Said you're going to have a little bit of a dustup over there at 425 Cherry. They want to come and talk to you about what's going to happen. Rabble-rousers are going to cause you trouble. So we talked about it, how we are going to do this, they're going to send this big man in the room, in the waiting area. And this big plainclothes cop. We had somebody there, just to make sure everything was going okay.

We made arrangements for when the police were going to be there. Fact is, I don't remember the name of the detail officer, but I remember that he was a Hollander, a big Hollander guy, and we had a bunch of these rabble-rousers come in and talk at us and just splitting up nonsense. I don't recall that Ford was actually in there at the time, but there were other ordinary citizens like the rest of us who were there. They wanted to listen. They heard these kids talking about Vietnam and when at five o'clock the big bull decided that it was time to close the door. "How late do you stay open there, Mr. VanderTill?" "Well, usually about five o'clock we close." "Okay, we'll close the door."

They pushed the rest of these kids out the door at 425 Cherry. I didn't think much of it and we locked the door and left. The next day when I came in, huge stones had been thrown through this plate glass window. What in the world is going on here? So we called the landlord and called the police department, and we had some conversations with the landlord. He came in and he said, "You're probably going to have to find another place to get you an office here." And I said, "Excuse me, are you going to kick us out of the Congressman's office here? You going to give this chief Republican from the U.S. Congress – you're going to ask him to leave your offices here?" So I tried to do a shame job on him, and it worked. He decided to let us stay there.

Smith: What did Ford think of all this?

VanderTill: Ford wasn't in on it.

Smith: But you must have kept him informed or he must have known that there had been violence committed against his office.

VanderTill: I can't remember how that happened. I may have talked to Frank, I don't know.

Smith: It's clear that there was a period of turmoil. Do you know if he was having arguments within his own family about Vietnam?

VanderTill: Probably, I don't know. I don't know how that came out with the staff, how it worked out or whatever.

Smith: Now, you mentioned Frank again. Was he in DC?

VanderTill: I don't recall that he was, but I don't know.

Smith: What was your role at this point in the office? What was your function?

VanderTill: Well, we were there to listen to these people come in and rant and rave at us.

Smith: So you were a member of the staff.

VanderTill: I was the staff director.

Smith: How had you gone from that internship, that summer job, to become a fulltime staffer?

VanderTill: We didn't make that jump, did we? No. We could do that. After that summer internship I got back to Calvin and I had spent some time with people at the state government level set up by Bob Vander Laan. He was a friend of mine for a long time, and a state senator. I said, "What are we going to do next?" He said, "Well, Gordon, are you going to law school or what are you going to do?" And I wasn't sure about this or that or whatever, and decided that I would talk to some people. And so I had more people who had greater fidelity to what really happens to their lives. Are they working for government service, are they working for politicians, are they doing this and that or whatever?

I talked with Jack, whose last name is long gone, who was George Romney's legal counsel. I spent some time talking with him, he said, "What is it you want to do, VanderTill? You want to go to law school, or what are you going to do?" And I said, "Well..." Yakked with him a little bit back and forth, and then I said, "Well, I'm really interested in government and politics and I think that what I should do is go into law school and that would be a good way for me to go this way." He said, "Well, do you want to be a lawyer?" And I said, "Oh, I don't know. Maybe." And he said, "Well, if you want to be a lawyer, that's why you should go to law school. And if you don't want to go to law school, then you shouldn't go to law school."

So we sort of filtered that one out. This other fellow - who was the head of the Department of Commerce in Michigan at the time, his name was Dion - and I had time to sit with him and talk. It turned out that he had been a student at the U of M also and there was an alternative that I could possibly use by getting a master's degree in public administration. A MPA degree. They thought it would be a good idea, and I decided to do that. So that's how I got into doing that kind of work. At that point - this is a long story - it's a lifetime.

Well, at any rate, I was very much involved in looking for employment; I was married. I decided that one place that I was really interested in was the Central

Intelligence Agency. CIA. We had a letter from the CIA that indicated that they had known of my history in the Army Security Agency and they were interested in people like me. And so I was rather intrigued by that notion. How things might have turned differently, you know? I ended up going to Washington, DC. I also was interested in the National Security Agency, NSA in Fort Meade. I had spoken with them in Washington. On my own I went down and interviewed with them. I decided I didn't like the cut of their jib, so to speak, and what they were hiring mostly were Georgia Tech graduates involved in their master's degree programs in math and things of that nature. I decided I didn't want that NSA thing.

I then ended up spending time with CIA people. In fact, of all things in the world, the CIA had a office in Ann Arbor, Michigan in an office building. This is when everybody hated the CIA, it was crazy. I had talked with them and I'd gotten okay, buy me a ticket or whatever. So I went to CIA to interview with them there, also. I found the interior look(?) at me and how they were looking at themselves and how I was watching how they were doing whatever they were doing and I found it very intriguing. Their approach to more secretive was CIA than it was with NSA(?). They said you go get yourself a ticket and fly on down to Washington. Such and such a hotel and they'll pick you up in the morning on this bus at such and such a place. It was all very vague. They said, "Keep good records and we'll pay you back for whatever it costs." So I said, "Okay, I'll just write it down."

I went through several days of interrogation by CIA. Now if anybody were to listen to this, they'd probably say, no, that's not the way he did it. That's just not how it happened, that sounds like a big story he made up. I didn't. So they said to do this and do this, and then you've got to go over to this office over here and you've got to make up a story for whoever you are going to tell about who you are working for if we offer you a job. I said, "What are you talking about?" They said, "Well, you're not going to tell anybody you've just gone to work for the CIA."

Smith: Need a cover.

VanderTill: So, I was going to be a DAC in the Department of the Army (?), and we made up all kinds of stories, then this woman gave me a list of money that I had spent on this trip to DC. And how much did I spend, and where did I go and what did I do, etc., etc., Then I went in this wire cage about the size of this dining area, and unlocked the door and in I went. There was this woman sitting there with buckets of money. (How your government works.) And she said, “Well, I see that came out to \$145. Here you are, Mr. VanderTill, thank you very much. Have a good trip home. Bye.” It’s like, Joni doesn’t probably believe any of this, but it’s all true. It was an incredible experience, just incredible. I didn’t take the job as it turned out. I ended up going to the U of M and applying to the public administration program.

Smith: Today it would probably be at the Ford school.

VanderTill: Well, now, yes. We’ll get to that irony in a minute. This was – I’ve gotten it written down someplace, I can’t remember, but it’s the advanced degree and whatever for everybody who wanted to get a degree in public administration. That’s the course that I followed – for those who wanted to be city managers. I used to call it How to be a City Manger in Six Easy Lessons. A little bit of daring about that.

Smith: So from municipal government to Gerald Ford and U of M, how did that transpire?

VanderTill: Well, I was at the U of M; I was one of a small number of people who were competing for a fellowship. And I won one of those. I guess a fellow turned out to be a good friend of mine. Then I was working there as a fellow to the Michigan Municipal League. John Honeywell was the man who was in charge, my boss at that time. I was doing the wage and salary summary. Went out to all the members of the Municipal League so that they knew how much money and what the benefits can have for their people, etc. So I did that. Where did I go from there? This is a painful process, you know?

Smith: Did Ford run into you or ask you, in effect, to come back? Because obviously he remembered you from your days – the summer job.

VanderTill: Yes. I’m not sure on that. I’m trying to think how that finally came out to be.

Smith: And what was the job that you took with him when you first went to work fulltime? Were you in Grand Rapids or were you in Washington?

VanderTill: I was in Grand Rapids.

Smith: In the constituent office?

VanderTill: Well, I was not, no, when I took the job. I had finished my master's degree and I don't remember exactly how – oh I know. After my master's degree I was working Constituent Services for Bob Vander Laan, in the state's senate. And I got involved with Emil Lockwood also, who was the senate Republican leader. I had one day off from work because I was ill, and when I came in the next day, I talked to Bob Vander Laan. He said, "Now, Vander Laan, Gordon, tomorrow when Emil Lockwood is going to be here, he's going to want to talk to you for a while about something." I thought that was interesting. "Well, I think he has a job he wants you to do." I thought, "Really." He said, "Don't say no just because of me." Whatever. Vanderlin and I were good friends and go back for many campaigns and whatever.

So I ended up talking to Emil Lockwood and he said, "The Nixon people have just asked me to be the head of the Nixon Committee for Michigan." I think that was 1968. "So, we're going to want you to run the office, and we're going to work on this and do this and this." I had never run a statewide campaign of anything. So that's how that started. We got involved in a whole host of issues and it was a very difficult campaign. We were there before – in fact, as I can relate back to the recent Republican campaign we just had here. We had no money. We couldn't raise any money. We didn't have any material to pass out to people. It was just a mess. In fact, I have a report that I wrote based on how they screwed up the campaign. Not because I was so wise, but because they didn't do it the right way. The President campaigned. Had no chance for this last one. Part of the problem is you can't run a good campaign with no money. After the campaign was over, after Nixon was chosen as the candidate, as the Republican candidate for the year, I was looking at the Plum Book. You know what the Plum Book is?

Smith: No.

- VanderTill: I wanted to maybe get a job working for the federal government for the Republican candidate, the Nixon people and company. Well, I didn't know what rascals they were, but we found that out. One of the people that I had met along life's way was another Ford. His name was Tom. I had worked with Tom in his last campaign for re-election to the state House.
- Smith: Was he close to his brother?
- VanderTill: I thought so, yes. I would say so.
- Smith: Were they similar in their political outlooks?
- VanderTill: Pretty much, yes. They were pretty much on the same view, so to speak. Tom was a decent guy. Had a good time. Oh, the way we campaigned those days – what a change now. We had a sound car. Tom's campaign was, in the primary, against a mayor of Kenwood. What's his name, Joan? Tom? No? Pete. Pete Lambert. Good man. Tom beat him. So anyway, I'm working in Lansing and at that time I spent some time talking to Tom. I said, "You know, I worked on this Nixon campaign. I put all this time in. I've got this Plum Book and I'd like to have a job someplace." Tom says, "Oh, yes. That seems reasonable. A good idea." I said, "Maybe some night when you talk to Jerry on the phone you could talk to him about it." Tom got back to me and he said, "I talked to Jerry and he said, 'Good one. Good idea.'" That was like "Oh wow." I didn't know I had the cojones to do that, but anyway, I did. After that I didn't get any offers that were worth a nickel. And what did I do at that time for working? I think I may have worked for Vander Laan, but I'm not sure at that point what I was doing. What else did I do, Joan? Anything? We miss anything?
- Smith: But I'm still trying to get you to Ford.
- VanderTill: Oh to Ford. Well, I think Ford probably said something to the rascals who were running the campaign, but it was certainly nothing much. So, how did I end up with Ford's staff? I went back to work on Vander Laan's staff and I got a call from Frank Meyer again. I picked up the phone and it was Frank Meyer, and he said, "Hey, Gordon, how are you doing? What's happening? What are you doing now? Are you doing anything?" Then Frank said,

“Gordon, Mr. Ford and I have been thinking that maybe we should have somebody fulltime in Grand Rapids. Sort of working that office for him.” And that’s how that came about.

Smith: Okay. Now, did you stay in Grand Rapids, or did you go to DC to work?

VanderTill: No, I was living in Lansing, when when I went to DC, sort of a covering talking to, and discussing what’s going to happen here. So Frank says, “We want you to go over and see the Veterans Administration. Then you can go over here and over there and talk to those people.” Frank was setting up other appointments for me to meet people and talk about what goes on, etc., etc.

Smith: Was that in anticipation of your going to work in DC?

VanderTill: No, in Grand Rapids.

Smith: I want to understand, you ran the office in Grand Rapids. Did you ever work in DC? In the DC office?

VanderTill: Other than that summer internship. That was it.

Smith: Let me ask you, because here’s a man who is politically secure, doesn’t have to worry about getting re-elected; but apparently much more than, say, his counterpart today, made a point of still coming home.

VanderTill: Right. He did, indeed.

Smith: Tell us about that. Why did he do it and what did he do when he was here?

VanderTill: Well, some people thought that Ford was getting big britches and there was just enough nattering away about that and he didn’t want that to happen. He didn’t want people to think that. So he wanted to have somebody local here. Jerry and I talked about it. He said, “We’ve got to make sure that we have somebody here who can keep us attuned to what’s going on, what do they hear about, what’s going on in politics? Do you need somebody to do this?” and whatever. So I think it was not so much that he was fearful, but he wanted to make sure that he was covering the scene, so to speak.

Smith: Did he ever have a primary challenge?

- VanderTill: I don't remember that he did.
- Smith: And was he ever seriously challenged in November?
- VanderTill: Yes, well that was Jean McKee.
- Smith: And who was she? Why did she pose a serious challenge?
- VanderTill: Well, because she had a lot of money from the unions. That was one. Plus she had at least one or two people who could do things about politics. Jim Riekse. He was pretty good.
- Smith: And he took that challenge seriously?
- VanderTill: Ford did, yes. In fact, at that point I would not let him not take it seriously. Not because I was so wise, but because what I decided to do was to convince him and others that we needed to have a better campaigning operation. One of them was Jack Stiles. Yes, you heard that name. Yes.
- Smith: Tell us, because he seems to be at the local level in some ways as important, and polarizing a figure as Bob Hartmann was in the Washington office.
- VanderTill: Very much, yes.
- Smith: Parallel?
- VanderTill: Yes, like that.
- Smith: But what does it tell you about Ford, that he was comfortable with these people who were controversial?
- VanderTill: The word is smart. You know who your enemy is or where and what he or she is doing and is up to it. Now, having said that, Hartmann was not an enemy of Ford, nor was Jack Stiles. They were buddies from the Navy, for crying out loud. And it was a wonderful combination, those two. They were something else. If you had a buddy and you wanted to go and raise hell at night, let's go out and get drunk or whatever – well, they didn't do that, but that kind of thing.

- Smith: It has been said that one of the things that Stiles and Hartmann also shared was a thirst.
- VanderTill: Thirst for power or what?
- Smith: Well, I'll let you fill in the blank. A more basic thirst.
- VanderTill: Yes, I know what you mean.
- Smith: I'll jump ahead here. Nelson Rockefeller as vice president became somewhat paranoid about a number of things, including Don Rumsfeld. He didn't age well, put it that way. He had convinced himself that there were people around President Ford who did not want to see him re-elected. That there were, in fact, people around President Ford who, for lack of a better word, I'll say, delayed a re-election campaign beyond a logical starting point. And he had even convinced himself that Jack Stiles' death may not have been an accident. That's how far he had gone.
- VanderTill: Jack Stiles died by himself. Now that road that he drove off there where his house was, he could have driven that with a snout full of booze forever and never missed a turn. I think somebody drove Jack Stiles off the road. He hadn't been out drinking and missed the curve. That's not the way it happened.
- Smith: I want to understand this. I realize you are theorizing here. Was Nelson Rockefeller totally paranoid to believe that Stiles' death may not have been an accident? When you say someone else drove him, was that an accident?
- VanderTill: Who is the guy that was killed in Washington on the – Secret Service guy – along the Potomac? Come on, Joan, you know. Everybody theorized that something happened to him.
- Smith: In the Clinton administration?
- VanderTill: Yes.
- Smith: Oh yes, you're talking about the guy from Little Rock, the counsel who committed suicide up wherever it was. [Vince Foster]

VanderTill: Yes. I've been through those places. I don't think that the governor of New York would have done that to get rid of Jack Stiles. Or if he had thought that it was necessary to do, he would have been more careful.

Smith: No, *he* thought that someone else had been responsible for Stiles' death. And he connected this with the fact that the Ford campaign was so late in getting off the ground and that somehow there was a connection between Stiles' untimely death and the delay of the campaign. That's where he was coming from. How important was Jack Stiles to Gerald Ford's political operation?

VanderTill: Ford had a lot of confidence in Stiles' ability to think through ways of doing things.

Smith: Did Stiles have a title?

VanderTill: Stiles?

Smith: Yes.

VanderTill: Sort of. Chief Schmuck or whatever. I don't know.

Smith: Crony?

VanderTill: Crony – that would be one. Jack never had a moment where if he thought it was important for him to go talk to Ford, he'd go in there and say, "Hey, I've got to talk to you."

Smith: Okay. And that sounds like Bob Hartmann as well. In Grand Rapids, were you aware of how polarizing a figure Hartmann was down in Washington?

VanderTill: Hartmann? No. Stiles, I knew some of that, yes.

Smith: Because he was in your neighborhood, in effect.

VanderTill: Yes. I kind of enjoyed Jack. He and I teamed up on a couple of things.

Smith: Watergate comes along.

VanderTill: Oh, God.

Smith: And at some point Ford must have discussed it with the staff.

- VanderTill: I would think he must have, yes.
- Smith: Do you recall? You are part of the staff.
- VanderTill: Oh, no. I never talked about Watergate.
- Smith: Never talked to him about Watergate?
- VanderTill: No.
- Smith: Never discussed Nixon's potential involvement or its implications for the party, or for Gerald Ford?
- VanderTill: No. I don't recall that – ever.
- Smith: Well, when Spiro Agnew resigned, were you surprised by what happened next?
- VanderTill: Yes. I could tell you one thing especially about it. The real impact on Ford and on me was that I was moving from Grand Rapids to Washington. Mr. Ford and I talked about what I would be doing for work in Washington. Ford said, "Well, I hate to tell you this, but you're going to have to pay your own relocation money." I said, "Jeez, boss. I know what the housing market is in Washington. What are you expecting?" He said, "Well, I know it's not a friendly thing to happen, but the vice president's budget is shot. There ain't no money. Can't do it."
- Smith: When I said he was a fiscal conservative, that's a euphemism for tight.
- VanderTill: Yes. No, I didn't see it that way. He was always generous to us or other people. So he was not that way.
- Smith: Were your salaries, for example, comparable to your peers?
- VanderTill: Yes, I think so. Pretty good. A lot better than being a Kroger store clerk.
- Smith: So you went to work for him as vice president? In DC?
- VanderTill: No. I wanted to, but I ended up working for the Federal Energy Administration. Which was a new idea from Nixon.

- Smith: Did you ever work for Ford again? During his presidency?
- VanderTill: I don't think I did. No.
- Smith: So you would have left him basically while he was vice president – before he became president?
- VanderTill: If I'd had the opportunity, probably yes.
- Smith: You said you went to work for the Federal Energy...
- VanderTill: Administration.
- Smith: And that was while he was vice president?
- VanderTill: Yes. He had some people around who helped me get a job.
- Smith: A lot of folks believed, when he became vice president, that it was only a question of time before Nixon was forced out of office. Did you sense anything about him at that point? That he anticipated that? He was in a very awkward position as vice president. In effect, called upon to defend the president, but at the same time not to go so far in defending the president as to sacrifice his own integrity or usefulness if he ever became president. Did he ever talk about the situation?
- VanderTill: I did not have the opportunity to discuss that with him. No. I'm sure that there would have been many who would have been interested in discussing that, but I didn't feel that I should do that.
- Smith: What were his strengths as a boss?
- VanderTill: I think I mentioned earlier that he was willing to allow a screw up...
- Smith: Once, as long you learn from the...
- VanderTill: I learned.
- Smith: What were his weaknesses? Because there is this school of thought that says good old Jerry never thought anyone ever had an ulterior motive and therefore, could be naïve about people.

- VanderTill: I never really thought of him as being naïve. I don't know of anybody who tried to pull anything out from under him.
- Smith: Does the name Robert N. Winterberger ring a bell?
- VanderTill: Oh, you got the book. You saw that.
- Smith: Tell us about Robert N. Winterberger.
- VanderTill: Did I show you the book downstairs?
- Smith: I saw the book, but we've heard about – there's someone who tried to take advantage. Who was Robert N. Winterberger?
- VanderTill: He was a lobbyist of some sort. I bought that book a long time ago and I pulled it out for this meeting.
- Smith: And did he exaggerate his relationship?
- VanderTill: Oh, by all means. Sure. I was not one to do that with Ford, where I would make myself to be of far greater importance to Gerald Ford than whatever else I could be. In fact, I think I had other people that I encountered along the way of life in Washington who thought I might have had more importance than what I ever would have thought. I think I'm sort of a humble person. I don't think that I am self-seeking. My journey has been good. I believe that I've conducted myself properly.
- Smith: Did you see his temper?
- VanderTill: Not very often. I have heard of it.
- Smith: What have you heard?
- VanderTill: Don't piss off the old man. But that's all. I don't really. I have not seen him really, where he would be storming angry.
- Smith: Ever hear him curse?
- VanderTill: No – well, once in a while maybe. Not much.
- Smith: What about his sense of humor?

VanderTill: Yes, I think he's got one.

Smith: How would you describe it? He wasn't a storyteller.

VanderTill: Well, occasionally. But the world is much less, it is, with him being gone. He was a wonderful man. I would say that no matter what. I just never had any bad feelings about Gerald R. One time I made this wise remark about another media person. But that passed by.

Smith: You made a remark, and did he respond to what you said?

VanderTill: No.

Smith: You said you made a remark about a media person. Did he respond?

VanderTill: Like, "Well, you know you really shouldn't do that." It was that kind of a back hand, like you really shouldn't do those kinds of things, or whatever.

Smith: He sounds almost fatherly. Would that be an appropriate word to apply?

VanderTill: I'm not sure what you just said. What word?

Smith: Fatherly.

VanderTill: Fatherly, yes. Perhaps. I think he may have thought of me somewhat that way.

Smith: Did you know Mrs. Ford at all?

VanderTill: No.

Smith: She wasn't in the office?

VanderTill: No, no regard for her. We took her around one weekend in the car for some reason. Had to go here or wherever. I know he loved her a bunch. I never shared his affection.

Smith: Why was that?

VanderTill: It's one of those constants in elected officials and their spouses. It's the difference between them and a staff person, for example, and the spouse. I think that's part of it. It's sort of addressed in textbooks, along the lines of

why elected officials and spouses don't usually get along all that well together.

Smith: I can understand not wanting to offend the spouse, being concerned about that. But was there a reason for you to feel that way?

VanderTill: No. I didn't have an uneasy enough feeling, but I just didn't like her. I felt like she felt she was a little bit too good.

Smith: Okay. Did you sense any unhappiness on her part? We now know, obviously, that it was kind of a rocky road in some ways. And, of course, he was away a lot. She really was left with the kids. All of that.

VanderTill: Well, that's like asking me how Joni and I get along, what do you think?

Smith: Yes.

VanderTill: I just never really much cared for Betty.

Smith: But you also said you didn't have a lot of contact with her.

VanderTill: No, I did not. But I felt that she was kind of uppity.

Smith: Do you think any of that is traceable to her background with the arts, the dancing, and the cultural background that she came out of?

VanderTill: Yes. As opposed to taking Steve to ride a motorcycle. There's a real difference there. I still recall that with Steve.

Smith: Did you have much contact with him in later years?

VanderTill: No, did not. Didn't have any reason to.

Smith: Did your paths cross at all?

VanderTill: No, not once I was gone.

Smith: Okay.

VanderTill: I don't know if I've ever seen him since. He wouldn't know me if he fell over me. I didn't really have much to do with the kids. Susan, I guess, she was kind of cut out of her mother's box, I think.

- Smith: Is it exaggerated the amount of time that he was, in fact, out on the road? Once he became a Republican leader, we sense that he was constantly traveling.
- VanderTill: He was, yes.
- Smith: That's accurate?
- VanderTill: Yes. I would say so. Pretty much.
- Smith: And yet he still found time to get back here?
- VanderTill: Yes.
- Smith: How do you think he should be remembered?
- VanderTill: I never much cared for Bob Hartmann.
- Smith: What was it about Hartmann that made him so controversial? Because you are by no means the first person to indicate that. Was he possessive of Ford?
- VanderTill: Well, Ford took Hartmann to come with him. And I think Ford probably listened too much to Hartmann. I don't know. I just didn't like the cut of his jib, you know? He was just too much. One of the things was Ford was coming back to Cedar Springs, I think as vice president.
- Smith: Yes, he'd just been nominated. And the day after his nomination he came back to the Red Flannel Days.
- VanderTill: Well, that night I had my phone – just a single line phone – it had all kinds of messages. Every person in the media wanted to talk to Jerry Ford. Wanted to see him – when was he going to be here? When is he going to do this? Blah blah blah. I had a friend at Cedar Springs, at a little college up there, and I said, “You've been trying to get us to come with Mr. Ford to take a look at your college. And I'm wondering about whether that chapel that you had there, whether that would make a good place for a press conference?” No hesitation. Yes, of course. I had friends like that, that's part of what my job was. And so I said, “Can you set it up with microphones...” and we had set up a sequence for credentialing media. We started working that morning; when I

got up it was early and I had other staff and we were busy putting that together.

And then I got a call from Hartmann. “We’re going to have a press conference at the airport.” I said, “Can’t do that. Sorry, we’re set up at the college. It’s all set. We’re going to do it. Scotty got it all set up, got people coming in, going to credential the media, da da da.” He was like, “What do you mean? You didn’t ask me if it was okay.” “Sorry, I’m running this operation out here.” But it pissed me off big time. We pulled it off really well. And I never really got over our run over on that one. I never gave up a damn _____.

Smith: Big crowd at Cedar Springs?

VanderTill: Oh yes! There were pictures. I was walking down the main street with Gerald Ford and there were other people there. That might have been it, too. Maybe Hartmann wasn’t there, or whatever. Someplace we have pictures around, I don’t know where.

Smith: There are people who look at Hartmann and think that there is an element of jealousy that was built in. That he could protect Jerry Ford from himself. And that no one else had the same abilities.

VanderTill: I had done all kinds of crap like that for a long time – before Bob Hartmann even knew how to spell Bob. Is he still alive, by the way?

Smith: No, he died about a year ago.

VanderTill: Did he? Whatever. One of the really wonderful, fun things we had happen, had to do with Spiro T. – and Gerald R. Ford. What had happened for several months, apparently from what I could figure out, every time Ford would see Spiro, he would say, “When you coming back down to my town now? We’re going to have you here, you can come speak.” And it’s like, “Yes, I’m going to do that, Gerald.” And finally, one day, everything clicked together. Yes, we’re going to have Spiro T. back. Well, this is the middle of bad stuff going on with Spiro.

I got a call, probably from Frank, I don’t remember, but “Now, we’re going to have the Vice President here, he’s coming to talk at Calvin College.” “What?”

"You're going to what?" Oh, those kids didn't want to hear him. And somehow – not me, I didn't arrange it, I knew better. But somebody else arranged it that that's where it was going to be. And I got the word that "you're going to deal with, volunteer with the advance people, Gordon."

"Where we going?"

"Calvin College." Yes right. Being a good soldier I did my salute and said okay and I met with them at the Pantlind Hotel, and we start getting all kinds of crap. They keep throwing out, "How come we're going to meet at Calvin College for the President and Vice President and Mr. Ford?" and blah, blah, blah, and I said, "Well, that's because Mr. Ford says that's where he wants it to be." Their advance people are grumbling. That's the way it is. That's what Gerald R. Ford says, that's where it's going to be. "Oh, we can't do that." That was like pouring gasoline on the fire. I agreed with them.

Smith: Did Agnew show up in the end?

VanderTill: Oh, absolutely.

Smith: At Calvin?

VanderTill: Bet your butt. So, anyway, we're down there, see, and they went in this hotel room and they said, "Let me use that phone. We'll get hold of Mr. Ford and you can hear him say it himself." Called from outside to Crown View Drive. I hated myself for that. I said, "Hi, this is Congressman Ford's office calling and the people are here from the Vice President's staff and they want to talk to Mr. Ford about this...." Well, I mean, this advance guy must have crapped his drawers. He said, "....where are we going?" And they settled it. Ford said, "It's going to be at Calvin College and that's that." And those other people were so angry, as angry could be because I got them snookered. So, I said, "Well, I work for Gerald R. Ford. I don't work for these clowns." I never forgot this as long as I've lived.

Smith: That's a perfect note on which to end.

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