

Gerald R. Ford Oral History Project
Greg Ford
Interviewed by
Richard Norton Smith
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Smith: First of all, thank you very much for doing this. It's hard to know where to begin. Tell me about your dad and his place in this story.

Ford: Well, my dad, Jim Ford, is the youngest of the four brothers and obviously, I'm the youngest of his four children. Dad was always Uncle Jerry's little brother and you could tell that.

Smith: How much age difference was there?

Ford: Fifteen years. And there's actually fifteen years, ironically, between my oldest sibling and me. In that thirty year gap there is part of the reason why a lot of people think that Uncle Jerry is actually Grandpa Jerry to me. And so it's led to some interesting situations over the years. But Dad being the little brother, I just remember – well, frankly all three of the brothers treating Dad differently because he was the little brother. But Dad was an optometrist here in Grand Rapids, and I'm now an optometrist here in Grand Rapids – took over his practice. So it's been a lot of fun being centered here in Grand Rapids, and being part of that legacy, my dad's legacy, but also Uncle Jerry's legacy, frankly.

Smith: Now, just for the record: there's your dad, and then the President and then the two other brothers?

Ford: Tom and Dick.

Smith: Was it Tom who went into politics?

Ford: Yes.

Smith: Served in the legislature?

Ford: Yes. He was a state legislator and after that was a lobbyist for several years. But Dad never had any interest in politics, never went anywhere near it. In fact, he stayed as far away as he could.

Smith: It struck me at first as odd, and then I came to understand it when we talked to Dick. He said this may seem strange, but we never talked politics. He figured everyone else wants to talk to him about that, so he didn't. And so there were things that you would assume went on between those brothers that never did. Was that the same way with the rest of the family?

Ford: I would say yes. I don't remember my dad ever having any conversations, at least with me in the room, about politics with Uncle Jerry. Now, there were many conversations in our household about politics between my dad and I and the family and so forth, but I don't ever remember a conversation. The one exception to that rule would be when we visited Palm Springs when I was still very young. He was probably a year or maybe two out of office at the time.

Smith: And your age is?

Ford: I am now forty-five. At that time I was probably – I must have been thirteen, fourteen years old. I remember having a conversation. We were having dinner at the house in Palm Springs and I remember Uncle Jerry making a comment that struck me as unusual at the time - essentially saying that we're going to have a problem in this country some day, if it ever becomes the Republicans against the Democrats. Which struck me as unusual at the time; thinking, well, that's what it is now. Why would he make such a statement?

Now, realizing really what he was saying was: if that's all it's about – the Republicans against the Democrats – and now seeing where we are in the country and seeing how things are playing out, that comment rings truer and truer every year. And it's interesting that you asked that question. The one time I can think about any political discussion was that very issue, and that stuck with me. I couldn't tell you anything else that we talked about that night at that dinner. But that comment just stuck with me – I think in my fourteen year old mind, thinking, boy, I think the old guy's lost it because that's the way it is now.

Smith: You wouldn't have known your grandparents?

Ford: No. I have a very scant memory of my Grandma Ford, but I never knew Grandpa Ford. And, in fact, driving here today I drove past Grandma Ford's old apartment out on Fulton Street. That's what I remember of Grandma Ford – that apartment building. Every time I drive by it, I think of Grandma Ford.

Smith: Where on Fulton Street is it?

Ford: Fulton and College. It's a great old colonial structure that is still there to this day. But that is where her apartment was before she passed away. I remember going to that apartment. Now, I was probably four or five years old when she passed away, so it is one of those very scant memories. That's the only memory I have of Grandma or Grandpa Ford.

Smith: Did your dad talk about his folks?

Ford: Oh, yeah, quite a bit.

Smith: What was passed on to you about them?

Ford: They were hard workers. I remember there was a lot of discussion about the fact that they worked hard. I remember conversations much later about what Grandma Ford endured in leaving her first husband and coming to Grand Rapids and all that. But that was something that was shared with me way later in life.

Smith: Just because it was such a sensitive subject?

Ford: Oh, I think so. But yet it was a story that I think my dad felt had to be passed on from the perspective that it was a daring move at the time, and showed a lot of guts and a lot of chutzpa to be able to do that at that time in life. Again, just the way things were then, you just didn't do that, and that took a lot of courage on her part. I think he wanted to share that with me as part of the family legacy. But also, just some of the things that Grandpa Ford endured through the Depression, some of the things that he went through to be able to make it work for the family and so forth.

Smith: My understanding has always been that at some point in the Depression they lost their house, or they moved from one house to a much more modest residence.

Ford: Yeah, that's what I remember. The story that was passed down to me was they left a bigger house where everybody had their own room and so forth, and moved to a smaller house where everybody was kind jammed in and so forth. I don't remember a story about losing the house, but having to downsize.

Smith: Do you know in what neighborhoods those were?

Ford: I wish I could tell you. To put all those pieces of the puzzle together and that would be a little more challenging for me.

Smith: Your dad was old enough to remember the Depression?

Ford: I would say probably not. I think probably those scant memories, and I'm sure stories were told to him. But I would say probably not. I don't remember him conveying any other than second hand, third hand stories.

Smith: Are there qualities that you think of when you think of, the four brothers, that define the Fords?

Ford: I would say all of them were incredible gentlemen in every way, shape and form. Honest, just great gentle men. Didn't speak ill of anyone. I don't remember my dad ever saying a bad word about anybody – even people that had done things wrong to him or that had really wronged somebody, he would still always try to find “the good” in them. And I think that's the same with Uncle Dick, same with Uncle Tom, and certainly the same with Uncle Jerry. I just don't remember them ever having an ill word about anybody. In fact, there was, obviously, some ill-will between Uncle Jerry and Ronald Reagan following the election. I remember my dad saying to me, specifically, “That's something we don't want to talk about. That's a problem between Uncle Jerry and Ronald Reagan and we're just not going to talk about that. That's just not a story that we are going to share. We're not going to run around and tell everybody that Uncle Jerry and Ronald Reagan don't see eye to eye. We're

just not going to talk about that.” And at the time I was thinking, well, we don’t want to talk about it because it would be politically damaging or whatever. Now I realize we don’t talk about it because we don’t talk ill things about anybody. That was just their way of handling everything.

Smith: That raises an interesting point. Did you have in any way, at any point, a sense of being restricted? Along with the honor, recognition, in some quarters, notoriety – was there a downside at all to being a Ford, to being the President’s nephew?

Ford: Well, in answer to your question, yes, there were things that I felt restricted about. There were things that I knew that I couldn’t talk about. There were things that were told to me that would be told to me under the premise that we don’t need to share this with everybody, but here’s what’s going on or here’s what’s happening and so forth.

Smith: Would that include Mrs. Ford’s condition before or at the time of the intervention?

Ford: At the time, yes. Not before. In fact, I didn’t know anything about it, quite honestly before - or whether or not my brothers and sisters did, or anything. I couldn’t tell you. But I can tell you, at the time of everything going on and so forth, and it was hey, here’s what’s going on, but we don’t need to talk about that. But it wasn’t anything where I felt restricted. I didn’t feel that way; I just knew there was some stuff we just weren’t going to talk about and that’s all there was to it; and that we weren’t going to make anything public and that’s it.

Now, my mother was fond of using this notoriety, if you will, as a little bit of a crutch against me growing up. The idea that, “Alright, buddy, if you get caught doing something wrong it’s going to be all over the front page of the press. The press is going to love the idea that Jerry Ford’s nephew was caught drunk driving, or that Jerry Ford’s nephew was caught doing this or that. So watch yourself because...” And I will tell you that when I found myself in situations where I shouldn’t be, where every high school kid ends up at a party someplace where people are drinking and so forth, I got out of there.

And I didn't get out of there for many other reasons than I knew that, okay, my mother would be really upset if...

Smith: Does that give you a particular sympathy with your cousins?

Ford: I think so. But I am also very fond of telling people when they ask me questions in the office, I'm seeing patients every day and invariably questions come up about Uncle Jerry and what was it like, and so forth. I love telling people that we were close enough to it to get all the benefits of it, without being so close to get any of the downside. We didn't have to worry about Secret Service. We didn't have to worry about people recognizing us on the street. We didn't have to worry about any of that. Nobody, still to this day, really gives a rip who we are. The only time I ever had any attention, in Grand Rapids, anyway, was when Uncle Jerry passed away. Then some people recognized who I was and so forth, and did some TV interviews and whatnot. But other than that, I've been able to live in Grand Rapids and be away from all the nonsense that comes with that.

Smith: In his later years, post-White House, did you ever have a chance to see what he put up with, like the autograph seekers?

Ford: To a more limited extent, because the times we were with him were either in Palm Springs or in Vail or here in Grand Rapids. And I think those three places people kept their distance and understood. But I think, even then, I remember just walking through downtown Vail to go to dinner one night, and it was just all of us as a family, just walking through the streets of Vail, and yet having people stop and paying attention and so forth. And as a fifteen or sixteen year old kid, I thought that was pretty cool. As I got older, I started to realize that this would be bad news to have to deal with this every day.

Smith: Did they seem comfortable with it, acclimated to it? Did they ignore it?

Ford: I would say acclimated is probably a good word for it. I don't know that they would ignore it. I think they were keenly aware that there were always people around and people stopping. And even in that stroll through the streets of Vail, people would reach out their hand and say hello. What I really appreciated about both Uncle Jerry and Aunt Betty was the fact that they

didn't ignore anything. Now, they may be engaged in conversation, as you and I are now, and they may not see somebody's hand reach out, or whatever, but they wouldn't ignore it. They would pay attention; they would nod; there was some recognition of everyone that was around. Which is what I think made him so endearing to everyone in the country, much less here in Grand Rapids – he went that extra mile to really make people feel like they were special. And I still hear that to this day – people will come in the office and they say, “Boy, when your uncle was a congressman, I wrote him a letter about this issue or that issue and boy was it nice for him to write me a letter back, or call me on the phone, or whatever.” It was just phenomenal.

We had a wonderful meeting - Uncle Jerry and I had a meeting – it was to my memory the only time Uncle Jerry and I ever sat down together alone, out in Palm Springs, the March before he passed away. I was in Palm Springs and I just stopped by the residence, and we sat down and we had a nice 45 minute conversation, and one of the questions that I asked him was: if I were ever to go into politics, not that I have any interest in that whatsoever, but recognizing that he was getting into his later years and so forth – I wanted to ask a question that I just wanted to hear the answer from him to me. And so I asked him what was the secret to your success in politics? And his comment to me was: “I made everyone else's problems my problems,” which I thought - what a wonderful statement of a consummate servant. Not a politician, but a consummate servant, would be someone that made somebody else's problems their problems. What a wonderfully profound statement from a man who has lived that his whole life.

Smith: It's very interesting you say that. It's also very shrewd. One of the things that keeps coming up in these conversations is this notion of him as a nice guy who healed the country. It sometimes carries connotations of there wasn't much more there. To say he was without guile can be a euphemism for he wasn't particularly sophisticated, or whatever. But you don't get where he got without having political skills or calculating advantage. And out of it emerges the sense that there were times in his career when he put that image to use. People thinking, oh, good old Jerry Ford – maybe underestimating him – and that's actually to your advantage, to be underestimated as Ronald Reagan

showed over and over again. And it's fascinating that at the end of his life, he would describe what he did as making other people's problems his own.

Ford: Yeah. Well, as I think back on the interactions that I had with him over all those years, I genuinely believe that he really took those things to heart. It made a difference for him in how he lived and how he walked his life.

Smith: Did you have a sense that that might be your last visit with him?

Ford: I absolutely did. Yeah. We met in his private office and I remember walking out of the office and I just sensed that this is probably the last time I'll see him. And I had had interactions with him before, but there was just something about that time – I could see that physically he was failing.

Smith: Was he using a cane at that point?

Ford: A walker. In fact, it was a little bit interesting how the whole thing came together, because it was actually shortly after Reagan had passed away that I thought that I have to make a special point of going out and seeing Uncle Jerry, because he was not traveling, really, anymore at that point. And I thought if I'm going to see him, I'm going to have to go there. He's not going to come here because we'd always seen him when he was here in Grand Rapids. He'd make a point of at least saying hello or meeting here or wherever and some interaction. But knowing that he wasn't doing that anymore – we weren't going out to Vail for the golf tournament anymore and so forth – I knew I was going to have to make a special point of doing that. So I called Penny Circle and said, "Next time I'm in California..." She said, "Fine and great, drop by." Well, it was two years, or whatever, later that I finally found myself in California able to sit down and have that conversation. But interestingly, Penny was less receptive of the idea as that two years went by, and I called and said, "Hey, I'm coming out." And she said, "Greg, there's some things you need to understand, your Uncle Jerry..."

Smith: She was very protective.

Ford: Oh, absolutely! To the point where, when I got there, she said, "Well, we're not sure how this is going to work today, but we'll do our best." And I

thought, boy – then I started to think, well, okay this might be even more than I was prepared for. I was ready for a ninety-two year old man, aging and whatnot, even though he was the ageless wonder. But she made a point of taking me through his private office before he was even in there and showing me all the things; do you remember this, and do you remember that, and do you remember seeing these things, and so forth, which was great. Then she sort of escorted me out of the office and they brought him in. Then I came in and he was already sitting at his desk. I just thought that was kind of interesting that they didn't really even want to have me see him walk into the room. But his walker was there next to his desk and so forth, so I knew how he had gotten there. But it was the first time in all the years that I knew him that he looked frail and he looked like he was aging.

Smith: Had he lost weight?

Ford: He had. He was very thin and his color wasn't terribly good. You get a sense, and I definitely had the sense that that would probably be the last time that I saw him. But, what a great conversation we had. Like I say, I think it was the only time that I remember being in the room with him all by ourselves and just talking about whatever. The thing I remember most – and I was commenting earlier about Grand Rapids, how much I loved Grand Rapids, I couldn't get him off the subject of Grand Rapids. No matter what train we went on, he wanted to come back to Grand Rapids. He wanted to talk about Grand Rapids and how are things in Grand Rapids? He was talking about old friends and wanting to know about the DeVos family and any number of different things that always brought us back to Grand Rapids. So finally I thought, I'm just going to indulge and we'll just go down the path of Grand Rapids.

So I started asking questions about his memories of Grand Rapids and so forth. He shared some wonderful stories about Aunt Betty and Uncle Jerry meeting for the first time, and the first dates, and some of these things and where they were, and all this. He is describing these locations to me and I'm thinking boy, that's kind of a cruddy part of town now. But that was real special for me to be able to hear that. And then I went down the path of “tell

me more about my dad when he was a little kid.” He was a fifteen years old when Dad was born and I thought, well, he’s going to add some insights onto my dad that would be interesting and fun to listen to, and so we got into some of that conversation.

That forty-five minutes went by real quickly. But I could tell he was fatiguing, I could tell that he was ready. I also could tell, for the first time, he was making some mental errors that I had to help him through. At one point, in fact, when I asked the question about politics, he said, “Well, someday maybe you’ll follow in your dad’s footsteps.” And I said, “Dad didn’t want anything to do with politics,” and he said, “Oh, that’s right. That was Uncle Tom.” So, it’s a little slip and I’m a nephew, and I’m seen three times a year and that was the extent of it, so I didn’t expect him to put all the pieces of the puzzle together. But at the same time, he would have never made that mistake five years earlier. So it was apparent to me. And as our conversation went on, there were more of those types of things, so I could tell he was getting fatigued, he was getting tired and it was time to call it quits.

Smith: I often thought - he loved travel; he loved rubber chicken; he loved the whole routine. And I think when the doctors basically said, “You can’t,” that was a kind of death. Because it just restricted him.

Ford: Well, even when he was here for my dad’s funeral in January of 2001, he told me that he wasn’t allowed to travel without one of the family, according to Aunt Betty. Because Cousin Jack was here for Dad’s funeral, as well. And I made a comment that it was nice that Jack could come along and he said, “Well, Jack had to come, otherwise I couldn’t come, because Aunt Betty has made it very clear that I can’t travel without somebody in the family.”

Smith: Even with Secret Service?

Ford: Oh, no. He could not travel without somebody in the family with him. So I sensed even at that point that, okay, we’re ratcheting down away from being able to travel like he wanted to. And then it was shortly after that there was simply no travel.

Smith: But they did the ninetieth birthday event here. It was the last time he came back to Grand Rapids. You mentioned before that he came at the time of your dad's death, getting together down here. Describe that. Had your dad been ill for a long period?

Ford: Yeah, he had Parkinson's disease, or a form of Parkinson's disease called Lewy Body Syndrome and it forced him into retirement earlier than he wanted to retire, or I wanted him to retire. The greatest five years of my life was being able to practice with my dad. But the plan was it was going to be ten years or more that we were going to practice together. Well, we had to call it quits early and so he had been ill and he had been going downhill and so forth.

I will tell you, too, that during those times where he was in a nursing home in his later years, he would get very excited when Uncle Jerry would be on the phone or Uncle Jerry would be in town and he knew Uncle Jerry was going to come to visit and so forth. There was a different air that Dad had when he knew that his older brother was going to come for a visit. And that was really touching for us. So at the time of his death, and we certainly told the family that we'd like to have everybody get together if we could, Uncle Jerry was very kind to offer this office as an opportunity for my siblings and our families to be able to meet here. I expressed to him that really what I wanted to do was have a time where we could just talk about Dad's life and what Uncle Jerry remembered about Dad and so forth - just a nice opportunity to be able to do that. And as we came down and met for a better part of an hour, I think, here and had some great conversation. It wasn't all about Dad. There were some other things we talked about and wanted to know how Aunt Betty was doing and so forth. But it was neat for our kids to be able to interact with Uncle Jerry. That was kind of a cool thing as part of that, even though it was obviously a sad time for us in losing Dad.

Smith: How old were your kids at that point?

Ford: Well, my youngest was only one at the time, so it would have been a one year old, an eight year old and a ten year old. They were pretty small. My next closest sibling is ten years older than I am, so his kids were all fairly older and

my older sisters had older kids. But it was great to have that interaction with Uncle Jerry for them and to my knowledge, it was the last time we were together with him other than the ninetieth birthday party, where it was kind of an “Hi, Uncle Jerry, how you doing? – See ya later.” But it was really just a cool time for us to just be with Uncle Jerry in this environment without anybody else here. They had arranged through the museum to have a photographer here and we took some great pictures that my kids cherish as their one picture with Uncle Jerry. So they get a kick out of that and showing their friends and so forth.

The frightening thing for me is how many of my kid’s friends – who is Jerry Ford? Which from Grand Rapids, Michigan is a little disturbing to know that. It’s true. In fact, I had a conversation with a lady not that long ago – I’ve got a picture in one of my exam rooms in my office of my brother and I on the White House lawn. She’s been a patient of mine for ten years. And she said, “I’ve always wanted to ask how did you get this picture on the White House lawn?” And I said, “Well, my uncle was the President.” And she said, “The president of what?” I said, “The President of the United States.” And she said, “Oh, no kidding. Now, who would that have been?” I thought, for crying out loud. So it’s that kind of stuff that I’m amazed at, but, you know that’s the way history is.

Smith: Short memory. Were you at the White House during his presidency?

Ford: Yeah.

Smith: What do you remember about that?

Ford: It feels like it was yesterday, it really does. I was at an impressionable time - I think I was nine, ten and eleven during that time. And if I’m remembering right, I think we had three trips to the White House, but on only one of the three trips did we actually stay at the White House. It was a long weekend trip, as I remember, and we went on a Thursday and we stayed through Sunday night. My brother and I made it a quest that we wanted to see every one of the rooms of the White House – 133 rooms, or whatever it is. I think we saw all but two, and the two that we didn’t see, there were Marines

standing outside the door saying, “No, you’re not going in here.” And me as a nine year old and my brother as a nineteen year old, we weren’t going to argue, obviously. But just unbelievable impressions in my mind of what was there and the history; some of the things that we saw obviously, all the areas where the public tours are.

We had the opportunity actually when Uncle Jerry was sworn in as vice president, we were there at the White House and President Nixon had given us the honor of a tour of the White House at that time. But we only went into the public areas, the same public areas that everyone else went into. And I remember, as a very young kid, thinking boy this was really neat – just simply from the standpoint that we could be in places outside the ropes from where the public tours were, I thought that was pretty cool as a seven or eight year old. But then going back and actually living there for three days and being able to have the run of the house – you could go wherever you wanted to go, do whatever you wanted to do – was just super spectacular.

To be in the Oval Office and just see what went on from day to day, the Rose Garden. I can remember very distinctly my brother and I on our little tour on our own, we ran into a storage area on the third floor, as I remember, and we went in. We were just kind of looking around. What do you put in storage at the White House? And it was a lot of Uncle Jerry and Aunt Betty’s stuff like you’d find in anybody’s attic. And one of the things we found was a set of golf clubs that had Uncle Jerry’s name on the back of the irons. So we scurried down to the Oval Office to ask him questions about this set of golf clubs. He said, “Well those are clubs that Jackie Gleason had given me. In fact, why don’t we hit some golf balls? Go get your mom and dad and let’s go out on the South Lawn and we’ll hit some golf balls.” So we went down and I remember the Secret Service scurrying around, the Marines scurrying around while we went out with this golf bag, and we’re hitting golf balls on the White House lawn and there are a few people down at the fence watching and so forth. And I thought that was just the coolest thing, that here we are with the President of the United States hitting golf balls as you would if you were at any uncle’s house.

But I think that was what was so endearing about Uncle Jerry to me – the fact that here was the 38th President of the United States being Uncle Jerry to us. Not being the 38th President, just being like he would do if he was a barber down the road, and his nephews came to visit, he'd be doing the same thing. But it was all sorts of little things like that – sitting in the family quarters, I had my feet up on a little cocktail table in front of me and my mother about had a heart attack because she had looked at the inscription on the table and it was something to do with Abraham Lincoln. She about had a heart attack. This little snot-nosed eleven year old kid had his feet up on this table.

Another one of my favorite stories that I still tell to this day was Uncle Jerry and Uncle Dick and Dad were going to go play golf one morning. And we all met for breakfast in the family quarters and my dad had on, as would be the case back in the '70s, these loud, obnoxious golf pants. Very loud, very obnoxious. And so after breakfast we were just sitting around chatting before they headed off to play golf. Aunt Betty was sitting there and we were just having a nice conversation, and the conversation went away from her and she just stood up and went into the other room and she came back in and sat down. She had a pair of sunglasses on. Nobody really said anything until finally my mother said, "Betty, what are you doing with sunglasses on?" And she said, "I cannot stand to be in the same room with your husband's pants for another minute without my sunglasses on."

But that was the kind of sense of humor that I remember both of Aunt Betty and Uncle Jerry would have - that kind of quiet sense of humor. She would have sat there for an hour before somebody noticed, just to save the punch line. Again, a ten, eleven year old kid, but I remember it like it was yesterday. We had the opportunity during that trip to go to the Lincoln Memorial, to go to the Washington Monument and do some of these things and we were escorted around. Again, as a ten, eleven year old kid, that was great – jump in the back of a limo and have them ferry us in and stopping the line so we could go in these places. It was great to have that little taste of celebrity, if you will. That was great fun.

Smith: Did he have the pool by then? He had a pool built outside the Oval Office.

Ford: Yes, he did. I'm trying to remember – I don't think we ever had the opportunity to do anything in the pool. I remember seeing the pool, being around the pool, but I don't remember – and I think it was because that particular trip it was early springtime. It was probably this time of the year, in fact. I can remember the trees being very green and lush and so forth and the cherry blossoms, so it was probably early spring. I don't think we had the opportunity to use the pool.

Smith: I'm wondering if your dad or his brothers, or anyone else in the family, for that matter, talked about the pardon or the consequences. Locally, whether there was – we were talking to Warner Veit this morning and the paper was critical. I assume like anywhere else there was criticism. But I'm wondering whether it was something you ever experienced directly or talked about.

Ford: Well, yeah, there was discussion. Again, not directly with Uncle Jerry, but I remember a lot of discussions in our household about it, especially at the time. And I remember it for the first time I'd heard the words 'political suicide' in my house. And obviously it made me take notice of the fact, not really understanding exactly what was going on other than the fact that he had pardoned President Nixon, and that that would potentially be political suicide, and I wanted to understand more about what does that mean. But yet it was not made clear that that was it. It was just that it potentially could be political suicide.

Now, moving forward, after he lost the election and so forth, of course that was a big topic of conversation; what would have happened had he not pardoned Nixon and where would he be and so forth. Always the conversation would turn back to – well, it wouldn't have mattered if he won the election then, because the overall mood in the country would have been so bad and there would have been so much other trouble to worry about – losing our face, if you will, around the world, with the fact that our former president would have been on trial and all the rest that goes along with it. So it was always quickly brought back to the idea that, political suicide or not, it was the right thing to do for the country. Which was a theme that was repeated for many years.

Yet, I can remember sitting here, on this land, when we dedicated the museum in 1981 or whenever it was and I remember protestors chanting the fact that if you pardon a crook, you get a museum. And I took tremendous offense to that and I thought, this man did not pardon a crook. Now you could say that, but you're forgetting what he did for the country, and that was terribly offensive for me. But it was probably the first and only time to my memory that I remember just feeling my blood kind of boil a little bit – now wait a minute.

Smith: It's interesting. He said everywhere he went for twenty years after leaving office people always asked the same questions. But once the Kennedys gave him the Profiles in Courage award, the questions stopped. Almost as if having the imprimatur of the Kennedys... and in many ways he was lucky. Poor Lyndon Johnson died the day before the Vietnam peace agreement was announced. And your uncle lived long enough to know that most people had come around to his thinking on the pardon.

Ford: And that was huge for me and I think my siblings, was the fact that he did live long enough to see that; and quite honestly, that my dad lived long enough to see that. Because we all knew that it was the right things to do. We were very confident in that decision, there was never – none of us ever felt like that was a silly thing to do. We all had great confidence that it was the right thing to do. But we were waiting for the rest of the country to say the same thing. To say, "Wow, that was really the right thing to do." And I agree with you. The Profiles in Courage – I remember physically watching that and thinking to myself, I think this will do it. I think this will be the thing that will finally lay it out to rest. And how happy I was that Uncle Jerry was alive to see that and that my dad was around and what a great thing that we could put that to bed and know that he's getting the just rewards for a hard fought decision.

Smith: In the '76 campaign, of course, he ended it here. He came back and they had the unveiling of the mural out at the airport. Do you have memories of that?

Ford: Oh, absolutely. In fact, I've got a picture in my office now, a picture of the four brothers on that day with Air Force One in the background and Uncle Jerry with his Michigan tie. There were actually little state of Michigans all over the tie. But I remember everything about the campaign, about the

convention. It's very vivid to me and remember even Dad campaigning a little bit, which I thought was just hysterical because, again, he was so adverse to anything like that. For him to be jumping on a plane and going someplace to campaign and so forth.

I remember at one point in the campaign, I think it was Walter Mondale had made a comment – he was introducing Jimmy Carter and he made the comment – he mistakenly said, “I want to introduce the next President of the United States, Jimmy Ford.” Well, my dad's name being Jim, he's watching the evening news and he sees this slip up on the news and he says, “For fun, I'm going to write Walter Mondale a letter.” So he did, he wrote a letter to Mondale which said, “Thank you, but I'm not interested. I think my brother will do a better job.” And he got a return letter – I wish I had that letter. I remember seeing it and I have no idea where it went, but it was just a great letter.

Smith: Mondale is a delightful man. I had an occasion two years ago to interview him at some length, and just a delightful guy. And in many ways a throw back, much like your uncle. Election night - was it a traumatic experience?

Ford: It was a traumatic thing for me the next morning. The night of, I went to bed early enough, as a kid I went to bed early enough that it looked like there was still a chance. There was a lot of excitement around our house the last three weeks of the election, knowing full well that Uncle Jerry was making a big push and he was gaining a lot of ground really fast, and everybody in the press was talking about the fact that he was gaining ground fast and boy this thing could really flip around and watch out. So we were very excited about the potential. And even when I went to bed that night, I don't remember what time it was, but I remember thinking there was still a pretty good chance that we could pull this thing off.

But I remember getting up the next morning and my mother was still in her bed, but watching television. I walked in and she was watching the *Today Show*, or whatever it was, and I said, “Well, how'd it go?” And she said, “We didn't do it.” That was a little devastating for me, I think from a couple perspectives. One is, I just thought that he was going to win and that's all

there was to it, and voila! But number two was, does this mean I can't go back to the White House? Because I want to go back and play golf on the lawn. So there was that disappointment as an eleven year old, as well. But I remember the family being disappointed, disheartened, but at the same time, hey, this is the way the cookie crumbles sometimes and we have to move on.

Smith: Was there criticism – I guess this would be more directed at your dad and his brothers level – of the Ford's decision to go to California rather than come back to Grand Rapids?

Ford: I don't know that there was criticism, necessarily. I had always been of the opinion, and through both Mom and Dad saying that that was the better place for Aunt Betty.

Smith: You weren't surprised?

Ford: Oh no. For me, again at that point in life, I had never known Uncle Jerry to really live in Grand Rapids, so, for him not to live in Grand Rapids now was not a shocking surprise to me. So I certainly didn't expect him necessarily to come back to Grand Rapids. But I will also tell you, and brought out, in fact, by your comments, at the funeral – the fact that Grand Rapids was his home, even though he was in California, and the last conversation I had with him – it was very obvious that Grand Rapids was home. And that just was so neat for me to have that from him – with me living in Grand Rapids and being here in Grand Rapids and my roots are here in Grand Rapids and I don't have any intention of leaving Grand Rapids. That was really fun for me to see. And I didn't sit down and say, "Talk to me about Grand Rapids." He wasn't going to leave out anything about Grand Rapids. Once he knew that I was living in Grand Rapids, he was going down that path and that path only. So that's very heartening for me to have had that opportunity.

Smith: It's interesting, too, because one gets a sense he very much wanted this facility to be here. Fred Meijer had land on the outskirts of town. But once the decision was made it was to be in Grand Rapids, he wanted it to be downtown, and in many ways, it turned out to be the catalyst for everything that has followed.

Ford: I don't think there's any question. Well, I remember my dad coming back from a meeting about the location for the museum and being somewhat disheartened by the fact that they had chosen this location, because at the time it was a bit of a dump down in there. It was like, why there? They know more than I know. But as I'm sitting here today, as I think back at what it was like back then at that dedication in 1981, there wasn't anything downtown. Why'd you come downtown? You wouldn't come downtown. The farthest you'd come downtown was to the public museum which was on the outskirts of downtown. That's as far downtown as you'd come, unless you worked downtown. It's a whole different city.

Yes, Uncle Jerry was a big part of that equation, but it's the people in Grand Rapids – just the philanthropy that happens here in Grand Rapids is unbelievable. And what a great example for my generation and for the generation after me to be able to see what's going on and now seeing the DeVos children that are starting to pick up the reins, the same as their parents did. And the Van Andels and multiple families that have picked up that role. Grand Rapids is great and that's why I love Grand Rapids and I love coming back to Grand Rapids. No matter where I go, it's always great peace to come back to Grand Rapids.

Smith: Tell us about Aunt Betty.

Ford: Well, the sense of humor, obviously number one. But just a great, gentle, wonderful soul, so giving. I remember having conversations with her on the phone where I would, for whatever reason, be calling the house or calling the office or whatever to talk about this, that, or the other thing, and every once in a while she'd answer the phone, which I thought was always funny. I'd always expect staff or somebody to answer the phone; she'd answer the phone. And she would take extra time to ask me about what's happening in your life? Where are you in school? What's happening with you now? And that was really cool as a kid, but even as I aged and I started having children and so forth, she was always very interested in what I was doing.

I don't know her that well – she's kind of my distant aunt by location, if nothing else. I saw her as I saw Uncle Jerry; not very often, and had fewer

conversations with her over the years than I did with Uncle Jerry. That sense of humor – my mom had a great sense of humor, my Aunt Janet, Uncle Tom’s wife had a great sense of humor, Aunt Ellen’s got a great sense of humor, so the four wives of these four boys were trouble together.

I remember, in fact, my parents had gone to Camp David for Thanksgiving one year, and I can remember my mom talking to me on the phone from Camp David, saying, “We should have brought an extra suitcase because there’s a lot of stuff here I’d like to bring home with us,” and Aunt Ellen and I are doing this and Aunt Betty is behind us, she’s wants us to take stuff. And so I just got the biggest kick out of the fact that these four were up there causing trouble at Camp David. But her sense of humor and her gentleness are the two things that I really am most fond of. But also incredible strength.

Smith: She looks so frail and there she is – she’s ninety-one.

Ford: When she’s going to do something, she just flat does it. It’s a great legacy for me, personally, but for the entire family to be able to look at somebody that, again, looks frail. Doesn’t look like somebody who is going to hike up her boots and go a hundred miles an hour. She did for all those years, and by all accounts, all things considered, is still fighting the good fight. And so that’s a lot of fun.

Smith: A couple of things. Was there a pattern or routine after the President left office, of the frequency of his visits back to Grand Rapids? When he was here, what would he do involving the family?

Ford: It was real varied, to be honest with you. There would be a year where he would be back here five and six times in a year. And there would be another year where he’s back one time. But for the most part, I think he did a pretty good job of wanting to make sure that he at least made contact with the brothers while he was here. Maybe not the extended family, but I remember specifically my dad having to cut out of the office early because he was going to have Uncle Jerry over for dinner and they were going to have dinner together or whatever was going to happen. So I think he did a pretty good job with that, but at the same time, it was a little disappointing, I think, for a lot of

us in the fact that when anybody knew that Uncle Jerry was coming to town, their whole agenda got packed full so that those times for us - which is part of the reason why that meeting that we had in 2001 here in the office was so neat for us - because it really was that opportunity that we had not had too many times before, where we could just relax and be at ease with him. Often times, it was like I said before, we'd be, "Hi, Uncle Jerry. Hi, how are you. How are things? Good. Okay, see you later," and he's being rushed off to the next thing and the next thing. There were several trips and there were several opportunities to get together; maybe not for a long time, but even if there was a little bit of interaction, it was nice. Where we saw and interacted with Uncle Jerry the most was in Vail, part of the Jerry Ford Golf Invitational that he had in Vail every year.

Smith: By all accounts, they were beloved in Vail. They were more than celebrities, they were really seen as contributing members of the community - almost mascots.

Ford: Oh, I would concur wholeheartedly. In anything that I ever saw up there, I would absolutely tell you that that's exactly what I saw.

Smith: Tell me about their house in Vail, because I've never been.

Ford: It was a fantastic place; set into the side of the mountain. But not overstated in any way, shape or form. As you would expect from them, it was not overstated, but very comfortable, very warm. A couple parts of the house that I remember the most: one was a smaller room with a smaller ceiling line that was specifically for the grandchildren. It was just basically a mini room that if you went in as an adult, you'd have to hunch down a little bit to get into this room. But all the dimensions were small. It had smaller furniture in it, and I think it was a room, if I remember right, maybe over the garage or something like that. But it was a room that was for the grandchildren.

But the rest of the house, they had a wonderful family room/living room area that looked out over the mountains and I can remember sitting in that room with celebrities and just having conversations the way you and I are having a conversation now. Sitting there with Dinah Shore and any number of different

celebrities, Flip Wilson, Sammy Davis, Jr., Bob Hope. When I think of those times now, it's quite surreal, but yet just having a very pleasant, just normal conversation – “How's life?” – not getting into politics and not getting into celebrity, just very relaxed.

But the whole house was set up that way. They had a wonderful deck out in front of the house and Leonard Firestone lived next door. And I remember one of those surreal moments for me was when we went over for breakfast one morning during the golf tournament, and we'd finished breakfast and we were all heading out and Uncle Jerry was going to go get ready to play and as we're out in the street, getting into our cars, here stands Uncle Jerry on his front deck and he's motioning to Leonard Firestone, “Morning, Leonard,” – “Morning, Jerry.” Just the way you would with your neighbor.

Smith: Leonard Firestone is a very important part of this story, isn't he?

Ford: Absolutely.

Smith: He and Mrs. Ford really created the Betty Ford Center together.

Ford: And, again, very few interactions with him, but the interactions that I had with him – an incredible human being. Somebody – like we talked about Aunt Betty – this is what I think I'm going to do and I'm just going to do it, and there is nothing that is going to get in my way. Whatever I've got to do to get this done... Just a phenomenal human being. But that whole surreal approach of – here's two next door neighbors that – oh, one happens to be an unbelievable businessman and the other one happens to be the 38th President of the United States – wow, isn't that something? But yet they were just buddies, just hanging out the way anyone would with their buddies.

Smith: You mentioned sports a couple of times – did the family resent the caricature that some had created in the media about the klutz?

Ford: You know, I hate to use the word resent, I think resent is too strong a word.

Smith: Take issue with?

Ford: Yeah, I would say take issue with, but also, I think all of us found it relatively humorous that this man, who really was an impeccable athlete, and was actually not a klutz at all – in fact, if there was a klutz of the four brothers, it was my father. My father was ten times the klutz that Jerry Ford was, but yet, the media grabbed onto that and they just would not let it go. And I think we took exception to it, but at the same time, I think we took it with a sense of humor, and the fact that we knew better.

Smith: I wonder whether he, deep down, resented it.

Ford: Oh, I suspect, as any athlete would. When you are an athlete and somebody's kind of poking fun at your athleticism, I'm sure that would bother you a little bit. Not being much of an athlete myself, I don't know that feeling.

Smith: Were you surprised by the reaction at the time of his death?

Ford: Yes and no. I'll tell you what shocked me was, we got together with the family over here at the hotel. And we were down in the lobby getting ready to come over here to the museum, and I looked out the window in the lobby and I saw all these people lined up in a line. And I looked at my wife and I said, "What's going on downtown? Why are all these people lined up?" And she said, "Well, you bonehead." I said, "But the museum is over there." It wasn't until we got in the cars – they ferried us over here – we got in the cars and we drove out and the line went all the way around the hotel and all the way in front of the convention center and all the way down the road and all the way over here – that I went, "Wow, this is a big deal." Was I expecting a great reaction? Certainly. I mean, living in Grand Rapids my whole life and being part of the action here, I knew full well that there was going to be a big outpouring at that time. But it did surprise me just how much the people came out – and to stand in line for four and five hours to walk past the casket? Still to this day...I get emotional just thinking about it. It was just amazing to see that. So, yeah.

Smith: Was that the emotional highlight of those few days?

Ford: Yes – other than the plane. And I think that was the culmination of everything for us. That week there had obviously been a lot of emotion and

anytime...when Uncle Jerry passed away, of course, we're all thinking about my dad and it hadn't been that long since we lost my dad at the time. So there is a lot of emotion, but at the same time, we're going a hundred miles an hour, we're going from this thing to that thing and so forth and so on. And now it's the end, and those planes fly over and I was just...just weeping.

Smith: And the sun was setting. You couldn't have designed...

Ford: It was unbelievably surreal. The weather in Grand Rapids at that time – are you kidding me? In January to have that weather in Grand Rapids, Michigan? It was phenomenal.

Smith: Perfect note on which to end.

INDEX

F

Ford, Betty

character traits, 19–20

Ford, Gerald R.

1976 election, 17–18

autographs, 6–7

clumsy, perception as, 23

early years, 1–6

funeral, reactions to, 23–24

latter years, 10–11, 20–21

move to Rancho Mirage, 18

personal stories about, 7–10, 12–16

remembrance, 8–10

Vail/Beaver Creek, Colorado, 21–22

G

Gerald R. Ford Library and Museum

site selection, 18–19