

Gerald R. Ford Oral History Project
Jack Eck
Interviewed by
Richard Norton Smith
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Smith: First of all, thank you for doing this. How did your path cross with Gerald Ford?

Eck: Well, before he was vice president was he Minority Leader?

Smith: He had been Minority Leader, right.

Eck: He'd been Minority Leader when he came. We didn't have a hospital then, we just had a little clinic. At that time, the closest he could get into Vail was Grand Junction and they helicoptered him up to where Home Depot is now, which was the Bill Nottingham ranch. In fact, he got to be friendly with them to a certain level and went down to the house for dinner. And, I guess, even Bill with his cowboy boots and Neva, his wife, ended up in the Oval Office as his guest at some time. So, you can see how personable he was in interacting with the common folk around.

But in the first place, I was working with the Ski Patrol. I'd been a Vietnam veteran and my first year here was '71. And the Ski Patrol guys, seeing Vail growing and instead of treating just broken legs out on the hill, they were treating heart attacks and medical problems. So, I got to work with them and actually took two winters off to Ski Patrol full-time. But when his medical team came out there, they were intending take over and take care of Ford. You know, he was vice president and especially when he became president. So, we found these fellows who were basically Navy medics to follow him around. I think Lukash was in the position at the time, Bill Lukash. He worked things out with me as far as what to do around the little clinic.

Now, it's easier because we have a full bred hospital. But we had put together a cardiac program. This is before EMTs and paramedics were even invented. No one else had done it to my knowledge in the world. We had old defibrillators and cardiac drugs on the mountain. And we put together this rather sophisticated kit - actually, it started with an old suitcase - but we

actually ended up with a pack because we were outdoor folks, mountaineering. The Ski Patrol had to be able to take it down efficiently and know how to work things in the snow. Because, in the snow, you're not like in a warm operating room or emergency room, which most doctors, and frankly, a lot of the medics who came with him were used to. In fact, several came out of Washington and they had goulashes on and arctics and they had their gloves pinned to their shirt. And they were going to take over.

Well, we decided, as the Ski Patrol guys, not to interfere, but we would help them. But we also knew just watching them walk around that they were foreigners to snow. So, I remember, one of the medics got to be very well-known to everyone. We used to call him Ten Bubble because of some of the partying - drank ten bubbles before we could get on with the rest of the evening. And this is part of the background stuff that went on which no one else knows about.

Smith: Is that one reason why there were agents who particularly liked to come out to Vail?

Eck: Yes. Yes, they all got involved. I mean, actually, they still have homes here today and people in the community especially. Our head of the Ski Patrol director at the time was Paul Postwhite. And he and Larry Buendorf are best of buddies. In fact, Buendorf was at one of my weddings, just attending because he had his own place here for a couple of years. But we all got to know each other. Anyway, they were impressed with this pack that we had put together, the cardiac pack, which now is almost standard. And they modified everything they had in the White House as well as what traveled with him in the medical emergency pack based on what we had. They would call periodically and ask 'What are you doing out there?' and 'What's going on?' And we found at least through Ford, and I understand the next couple of presidents, because we had still the same contingent of what we used to call Sneaky Pete's rather than the Secret Service. That was our little game with them. They would call and interact. We would tell them where to go and what the new equipment was and what we were doing.

But, I can't remember his name, old Ten Bubble, but we got him out there on a snow mobile and we were going to show him a typical setting if something bad might happen. And the first thing he did when he stepped off the snowmobile was step and posthole down to his waist and he was helpless. He had just his galoshes around. All of a sudden, he looked around and said, "You guys take over. We're getting out of this. We'll just be back and help you." So, from then on, the Ski Patrol got engaged, and actually before every time they came out, they used our protocols and our medications which followed him around. Now, what we had established in '72, '73, and '74 is used everywhere. I think other people not necessarily copied us, but that is just what evolved as the emergency medical system got more sophisticated.

So, anyway, I had a connection there. They knew who I was and involved. When he became president, he was good friends with the Gramshammers. There was some medical issue there and they wanted someone involved, so Sheika Gramshammer actually sent them to me and we got along very well. I'm a small town kid from northeastern Pennsylvania, the Pocono Mountains. He's from Grand Rapids and had an amazing rapport with the whole family. So it was privilege to be involved with that.

Smith: Was it, in the abstract, at all intimidating?

Eck: The first day I was going to meet him. I was there and knew he was coming in, and I was a little intimidated personally. The moment he got in, he just started talking like myself. I mean, I didn't grow up in a big city. I went to a small town high school, a small college. I did go to medical school. So, our vocabularies were somewhat similar. I mean, you could tell. So, there was a bond. And after the first time, he agreed to call me Jack. He wanted me to call him Jerry. I said, "Out of respect, it's President Ford" this is a different deal. And Betty was Betty and I was Jack and we got to know the kids. Of course, the kids came out then and they were younger and they interacted with other ski instructors and Ski Patrol people. In fact, some of them had some parties back at the White House, which I guess I'll leave to some other historian. So they got to be part of the community, too.

Smith: At that point, Beaver Creek didn't exist, as I understand.

Eck: That's right. It did not.

Smith: And Vail was smaller and less elaborate than it is today?

Eck: Yes, the core of Vail, you see, was just about what it is where there's the main street. Where the big parking structure is there in town, actually, when they first came, Lions Head parking structure wasn't there, but the later periods it was. But there were actually in Vail three little hotels, The Night Latch, Poor Richards, and Short Swing. Of course, the Fords didn't stay there, but then there was a gravel parking lot. And you came across the Covered Bridge, it was still there, and those core buildings you see in those streets were there. And Mill Creek, where they stayed at the Bass residence, and they got to be good friends with Fitzhugh and Ilene Scott who were next door neighbors and they shared a swimming pool between them. Both Fitz and he liked to swim.

So I got involved with the Scotts, who were patients of mine, too, and there's another story out there that goes with the Scotts that we can come back to. So, they actually shared pools and through social events, I would come over when the Fitzhughs and Scotts were entertaining. Actually, he was the first architect here in Vail. He was the guy that put the curve in the street. If you notice, when you go across from where The Left Bank restaurant is and you go by Pepi's and you go by Gramshammer's, it's a curve put there on purpose. Fitzhugh always wanted it so you didn't know quite what was around the corner and entice you to walk out and of course you have the spectacular Grand Traverse on the Gore Range come into view, he put in there. Anyway, that part was interesting. And they had the old gondola there which was parallel to the New Vista Bahn, which is the high speed lift now. And another chair lift and that was it. Another gondola was put in Lion's Head which had a bad accident in '76 or '77 and they had to modify that but then everything expanded west.

Smith: At that point, the President was very much an active skier.

Eck: An active skier, yes. And, in fact, when he skied, Pepe Gramshammer was always there. He was his instructor and our ambassador.

Smith: Pretty good instructor.

- Eck: He was a great instructor, the world's best. And they had a contingent of Ski Patrol guys. And everyone had their own nicknames and they had their own nicknames on the crew. Chupa Nelson and George Cisneros were always assigned the Fords when they came out. Of course, they knew all the Secret Service, so everybody interacted and interplayed and it actually worked very well.
- Smith: Sounds like it was pretty relaxed.
- Eck: It was really relaxed and it was a lot of fun. I mean, people were serious. The Secret Service had a big telescope which they'd mounted on top of one hotel, so they would see in above the hill while the rest of us were working. And I remember one day, the Ski Patrol, which was very, very proud of their perfectionism and how well they took care of people. The Secret Service got a jab in because at the end of the day when you would ski, everyone would come down and we would have to go over the whole mountain and we did what we'd call a sweep. So it was sweep time and you're looking for people that are hurt or injured. Every once in awhile, somebody would hide in the trees because they'd want to ski by themselves and you couldn't find them. But that was a real ritual. Now, it's easier because we still do it but we use radios. Then we only had one or two radios on the mountain. So you had to wave off to each other visually when you'd clear a slope. Well, apparently, somebody was missed and one of the Sneaky Pete's up there was looking at the telescope and found them and called the Ski Patrol guys and gave us a hell of a ribbing. So, yeah, the jousting occurred a lot. It was wonderful.
- Smith: So, at that point, was there basically one ski area?
- Eck: Yeah, it was really Vail. Beaver Creek didn't come on – they started doing things there in '74 or '75, but until it really came online, it was '76, '77, '78.
- Smith: Was there ever in fact any kind of security scare that you were aware of?
- Eck: If there was, I'm not aware, but I've forgotten. I think there was one time someone was concerned something would happen, but it got to be a comedy of mistakes and errors. I can't remember. But nothing ever serious happened. I think the thing that they recognized, though he didn't verbalize it until years

later. They were comfortable here, because, again, if you've got a national figure or even John Elway and you walked into Vail unannounced, there'd always be a crowd. Here no one ever bugged them. They let them go. I'm sure people would turn their heads and look or point, but they really mixed in.

Smith: Which I think they would've appreciated all the more because, even when he went back to Grand Rapids, I think the bane of his existence were autograph seekers, particularly, commercial. And he got to the point where he recognized them and that was hard to shake. But my sense is that here that was not a concern.

Eck: It really wasn't. And I've got to hand it to him because he and I had conversations as he retired and he had more time, and especially as he got a little older, he would reminisce and we would sit in the office one-on-one and talk beyond immediate issues. And I guess he used me for sort of venting and sometimes not venting, but one thing he kept bringing up, he said, "You know, there was a responsibility to being president. People come and they interact." But he didn't mind it around here that interaction, because he knew it was friendly and they'd been involved in the community. And if they asked for signatures, he said, "You know, that's part of it. They respected it. I don't mind signing some." But the bane, like you said, was the commercial guys. If it was some kid or someone else, he said, "That's my responsibility. They go to me and this is it and I expect that." So I thought there a very, I hate to say it, mature way to look at it.

Smith: It's a very interesting recognition - that a former president has a kind of unique responsibility; it doesn't end when you leave office. How would you characterize his skiing?

Eck: I would say he was advanced intermediate. When you only ski once a year or a couple times a year, no matter who, that's good. He was stable and he was strong. Was he pretty? No. But he was comfortable. I mean, if you looked at him and not being like high Ski Patrol level or instructor, you would say he's got a way to go, but if you were someone else, you would probably say he's a good recreational skier. And he was safe and he was strong. Now, I used to hear the rumors about winging balls on the golf courses. Frankly, I'm

a hacker and I wouldn't want anybody out there. I would nail them right away. There he was a world class athlete. Was he All-American? I can't remember what level.

Smith: Yeah.

Eck: More athletic than some of the pundits there who used to tick me off.

Smith: That raises a question whether in any of those conversations - the whole Chevy Chase caricature - Did it bother him?

Eck: If it did, he didn't express it. He'd say "Oh, damn it," and he'd go on. He wouldn't sit and dwell on anything. To me he had a nice perspective on it.

Smith: What did bother him?

Eck: You know, from my perspective, not an awful lot. It's really interesting and I'll come back to your question of what I think. I used to sit here and think, "Here I am. Who else in the world would have the privilege? I'm one-on-one with the guy who held the most power in the world and he respects me for what I know. I respect him for what he knows. And it's just two guys hanging out." I mean, there wasn't any intimidation.

Smith: In fact, a relationship of equals.

Eck: Yeah, and I never thought of it that way, but once I got comfortable with him. Until after he passed away. I said, "I just can't believe that in my own life that I had the privilege of doing that." But back to the one thing that would bother him. He would say some things that annoyed him and it really wasn't the public, but it was either some other political thing. And he wouldn't say it adversely, he would just shake his head. "Well, I'm not going there."

Smith: From a very early age, I think, probably from his folks, he was taught to seek the good in everyone. He made a very conscious effort to do that. The only two people I ever heard him speak disparagingly of - and the worst epithet he could come up with was "He's a bad man" - one was Gordon Liddy and one was John Dean.

- Eck: I actually never heard him comment on those two. He would say, “Things happen in life which, at the time, seemed awful and annoyed me, and now I look in perspective it really doesn’t matter.” Not that he was dismissive, obviously, whatever made an impact on him, but it was good.
- Smith: Did he talk about Nixon?
- Eck: No. I never asked. I know some doctors can be in people’s faces and I had some nice mentors, myself. And my position, as seeing a patient, was not to get into ‘What’s wrong with this? What happened?’ but rather ask open questions and let them take the time and talk. My philosophy was the patient really knows what’s going on and they know how to talk to you about it, and if you ask the right questions, they’re going to give you the diagnosis. You don’t even really need labs, you just guide them. My relationship was more open, so actually, he did most of the talking, almost what you’re doing with me here as a diagnostician. That was my style and maybe that’s what he liked. I don’t know.
- Smith: He clearly took care of himself all his life. I assume there are good patients and not-so good patients. I assume he was a good patient.
- Eck: An unbelievably good patient. Most patients never follow the prescribed medications, they do their own thing, and they’ll apologize for it sometimes, but that didn’t bother me. Again, openly, I would say, “That’s all the best I can do. I’ll be glad to help you in every way you want to and if this doesn’t work, how do you want it to work and I’ll try to make it work for you.” And I would use that same openness with him. So, I didn’t treat him very differently in my diagnostic style than with anyone else. I just wasn’t an in-the-face doc, I think.
- Smith: Did you ever see the temper?
- Eck: Yeah, occasionally.
- Smith: How would that manifest itself? Was it on the golf course? On the ski lift?
- Eck: I mean, I’d see it there in the office as “Damn that guy,” but I never saw it out there in the community. I purposefully stayed away from the limelight. I had

opportunities where I could be seen and I could see some people around town who wanted to be seen. But I'd say, "You know, I'm a physician. I'm out of it until he wants me there." I just stayed out of it.

Smith: We've been told that the temper it was like a summer thunderstorm. It would erupt and then it would disappear. It was almost a cathartic kind of experience.

Eck: I never really saw that. You know, the most amazing time in my life was actually the last time I saw him. And I don't think I'm breaching anything right here.

Smith: There were clearly a number of folks who didn't want them to come up here those last couple summers.

Eck: Oh, a lot of people didn't. And I said, "It's up to you" because I got the calls.

Smith: You did.

Eck: Yeah. And I set things up. I said, "Whatever level he can come and function, I have no guarantees that he'll survive here, but I'll make it work for him whatever. If he needs the oxygen or needs the care." And he had good folks with him. But near the last year or two when he was here, I got our cardiologist engaged with helping out, Larry Gaul. Larry is an interesting character. When he came here, he was a college drop-out in the '70s. Worked as a waiter in the Red Lion. Long story short, went back to school and finished it and went on and became a cardiologist at the Hershey Medical Center where he did his training, which is internationally known. He returned here because he was a ski instructor at one time.

But when he [GRF] was having difficulty standing up, he'd get light-headed and fall, I was part of the background on that. We got down to the end and I don't know how much of this they reveal, so I'm going to be careful what I say, but we sat down there and we knew that the heart was failing, the heart valve was gone, I'd seen the echocardiograms.

Smith: Congestive heart failure?

Eck: Yeah, congestive heart failure. He had a bad valve. And that whatever we needed to do, would do one or two things. The most we could say, you'd have two years left. Or the other option was surgery but he might die in surgery immediately.

Smith: Was that the Mayo Clinic option?

Eck: Yeah. And, this is where I learned the character of the man. That's what impressed me, I'll never forget in my life. So the setting was discussed that we would send him to Mayo. The Fords had a connection there and, fortunately, our cardiologist Larry Gaul knew the cardiologist up there, Buzz Miller, and they talked about it. And the other option is, if you do nothing, you probably have six months to whatever quality time he could spend with the grandkids. So, a decision is, do we go to Mayo and get an operation right now? Or do we sit back and know you're going to have an okay struggle like you're doing, but still function - he could still look out the window and see the kids come by - and be gone in six months, no more than a year or two? Or just head out to the desert? What do you want to do?

So, the setting was, he was confined to a wheelchair. Myself and Larry Gaul went up to the house in Beaver Creek and there was Vaden and Susan and Betty and Larry Gaul and myself and they rolled him in and we just sat there in a circle. No one from the Secret Service, they were all gone. No one was in the room. There might have been someone else, one of the nurses or caretaker. I can't remember now. So I sort of set the stage of what we've got, what he was dealing with. Because this is when he wanted to go back and do that last, remember he was back in Washington at one of the Medal presentations when he had a tough time and he had to sit down.

Smith: Yeah, that was the last meeting of the Ford Foundation in D.C.

Eck: Right. And we set him up with special drinks to use, you know, Propel, which was a fluid he took all the time. We told him to stand up and wait awhile before he moved. He finally started mentally, not able to get it because he wasn't getting enough blood pressure. So intellectually, I saw it, so I knew it was happening on TV. So, anyway, we set the setting and then Larry Gaul

actually then went into the details of all those options which I just outlaid. If he went to Mayo right now. He might need a bypass surgery and might need the valve. If it was successful you might have a maybe okay two years. You might die right there and miss it.

Smith: I don't mean to interrupt, but I was talking with Penny through all of that. I remember her telling me that the people at the Mayo were very confident that they had these procedures and everything else and they wouldn't have advised it if they didn't believe there was a good chance of succeeding.

Eck: Right, because he still was fit. As fit as he could be. You know, someone else maybe we would have discouraged it, but with him, the same thing, we let him have the option. But how this rolls out is what impressed; I'm going to tell you next. So, I've gone through those details and Larry laid it out and he asked everyone in our circle for their opinions. We had a big coffee table here and there's sofas all around and all two, four, five, six of us were sitting there. So, he was in a wheelchair and he would rock back and forth, you know, he was a little fuzzy at times, but he started talking about some things. He was clear-minded and he listened to the options that Dr. Gall laid out. And he looks up after sitting there for five or six minutes, I mean, it seemed like it was just silence, he says, "Vaden, what do you think I should do?" So, of course, this caught Vaden by surprise, so Vaden went on with what he thought. I'm not going to reveal what they talked about. And he said, "Susan, what do you think?" I think one of the sons was there. I can't remember, but it wasn't Jack. I think Mike was there. He said, "Mike, what do you think?", "Betty, what do you think?", "Larry, what do you think?", "Jack, what do you think?" So we all tried to be supportive, informative, but tried to take the heat off it.

It didn't matter to us, it was his decision. And he stopped and he sat there for five minutes, ten minutes, fifteen minutes, and said nothing. We all just stared straight ahead. And then I saw him rise up like this and I thought God, he looks like an athlete. I mean, you could see determination. He says, "Let's go to Mayo." And I'm still getting chills just talking about it. Just like that. Within an hour, the jet is on its way here. Everybody is scattered. They're

doing their thing. Larry and I got things taken care of on this side. And they had him out the door. And a couple hours after he left, I got a call from the Vail ER and that's when Betty had her clots and Susan was going to be with her. So, I got her transferred immediately to Denver because I wanted her to see a cardiovascular surgeon. I'm not going to go into her medical file. The vascular surgeon stabilized Betty then flew her to Mayo to care for her so she could join President Ford at Mayo.

And, of course, once things didn't work out, I mean, he got the bypass surgery, but obviously he couldn't tolerate the medicines which he needed to support the heart, (it kept failing) so they sent him home to the desert. And that was September, October, and of course he was gone the day after Christmas.

Smith: But the issue was that basically, as you say, he couldn't tolerate the medicines.

Eck: Right. If the medicines could have sustained him until his heart could've regathered its strength and its rhythm, I think he would've gone another two years. I really do. But the medicines kept dropping his which he couldn't tolerate. But the point of the story is not the facts of medicine, but it was the way he came to his decision. And I was talking to the head of the secret sorrow contingent at the time, a tall fellow, he comes back every year. I see him at the concerts. He has a Polish name. Wonderful guy, he was the lead Secret Agent at the time. And I related, I said, "I can't believe it. I just saw this going around and asking everyone's input and sitting and then coming to his own conclusion." He said, "You know, that's exactly the way he ran everything at the White House and how made his major decisions." I said, "Bingo."

But I saw a part of his life that no one else except the inner circle saw. And the impact it had on me, the chill I got, to see how he made the decision, you can still see he had that competitive edge. That's why I said he rose up. It was like 'I'm going to block that guy. That guy's not going to get by me.' He was willing to put it out there, take the risk, and go for it. The rest is history. Anyway, I had to tell the story.

Smith: It's a great story. One of the agents who we've interview, a guy named Todd Matanick, had a wonderful story. The last time that he left the Eisenhower Medical Center, maybe a couple of months before he passed away. But he gets out of the hospital and in the van with the Secret Service and they said, "We'll go home now." He said, "No, I want to go to In-and-Out Burger." And they drive to In-and-Out Burger. He gets out of the van, he walks into In-and-Out burger, and stands in line. I mean, this guy had just got out of the hospital and he had to have his hamburger.

Eck: Did he have his butterscotch ice cream?

Smith: I thought it was always butter pecan.

Eck: Butter pecan.

Smith: You mentioned the butter pecan ice cream. Whenever I was around him anyway, he seemed to be an incredibly disciplined guy.

Eck: He really was.

Smith: In a lot of ways, including his diet. That seemed to be the one indulgence.

Eck: He swam diligently every day, even at the end when he could only do a half a lap or one lap. Of course, he had one of the Secret Service there in the pool. But, I mean, he was with it. He had it and he was focused. He was incredible. Also the personality of both he and Betty is, when he had more time there and he would start having more illnesses - I had a very busy practice - unannounced, they would come into the office and they would see me because I would always want to defer to him. He'd say, "Jack, I know you're busy. I've got a book. I'm going to sit and read. When you get a chance to get to me, I'm here." And sometimes Betty would come.

One day I will never forget. She's in there and she's sick. This is a different day from that day. She said, "Jack my agent out there is sicker than I am. Go take a look at her first." I said, "Really?" She said, "Yeah, go see what she looks like." So, I'm walking out in the hallway and of course there's this woman agent and she's obvious because she's got the thing in her ear and the wires all connected and said, "Betty said she wants me to look at you first

because she says you're worse than she is." And she just rolls her eyes. It was cute. But that's the way they were. They were respectful of everyone else and everyone's time. At least at that point in their lives.

Smith: A conversation I remember having with Penny over a fairly extended period of time; I think it got to the point where it was difficult for the staff. And I think it was difficult in some ways for the Secret Service because they're not to provide medical treatment. That's not their job.

Eck: They're not medical people. They told him that many times. They were at risk. They didn't want the liability, but they were it. They were the caretakers.

Smith: Exactly. And you don't have to live in the White House - there's got to be a threshold that's very difficult to cross when you acknowledge to yourself that you need help first of all. Secondly, my sense was that Mrs. Ford was very reluctant to have caretakers. I mean, she wanted to take care of her husband.

Eck: Absolutely. The affection between them was incredible. I mean, it's easy to say and somewhat trite to talk about them like two teenagers or whatever, but they cared and respected. But you could see it any time he was making a speech around town. He would say, "Betty and I," it would always be "Betty and I." In fact, from that, I picked that up. I sometimes give talks and speeches and I use my wife, and I thought, if he can do that, I care about my wife enough to do the same thing. So I copied it.

Smith: You're right. It was a great love affair. It was also in some ways a classic of opposites attracting. The most obvious discrepancy - I mean, he was religiously punctual and that was not her bag. And he clearly had adapted himself to her schedule rather than the other way around. Did you see that at all?

Eck: Yeah, I did. I could see that. I can't give you for instances, but I'd just been involved with social functions so many times that I could tell there was interesting things happening, that he was adjusting all the time. I really didn't have as much access to him - I kept myself from it as far as personal access - when he was president. I just respected everyone else and I was here if he

needed me. My access came a little more when he came back here and he was retired. Things became a little more casual. He would call the house. He had the number. It was interesting that he felt comfortable. For instance, just to show you how neat it is. I missed his 90th birthday or whichever one they had here. They had a champagne party and they had Dom Perignon. My own parents were failing. My dad had just passed away. My mom was 94. So I was going back and forth.

So, whatever that party, I couldn't make. My wife made it. She was there. And they had talked, he got to know her and Betty got to know our family. So, that story aside, a couple months later, I had a sister who was visiting in town, she was in Denver, and I had a caretaker who was one of the...actually he was a good skier himself, but he drove backhoes. But I have a little five acre property and a barn and he sort of lived there, gave him a free place to stay and he was glad and he actually helped me out. So, one day, I didn't know it was going on, I was gone. I was in the hospital seeing a patient. And my sister comes up to the house and this caretaker's name was Butch. And here's President Ford and Betty getting out of the limo, coming up with a couple of bottles of champagne and caught them both by surprise. But because I couldn't make it, they wanted me to have it. Well, they didn't have a clue I wasn't here.

The mix up was, the Secret Service came up like they usually do, it's going to be a little of a surprise, but where I live up this valley, you couldn't get cell phone service at the time. So they came in, I found out later from another neighbor, they checked the place out and said, "Well, Jack's not here. He's probably at the hospital." So they couldn't get the communication. Meanwhile, the entourage drives in and assumes everything is clear and sees my sister and Butch out there. So they left the champagne and were very cordial. I still have those bottles set aside today. I couldn't be there, but the fact that they personally would come out. They didn't send an emissary or what could have been a major – and then they sent me a note. They always sent notes saying "I heard your dad's not doing well", "Your mom's not doing well." That was just so thoughtful. They didn't need to do that.

Smith: And clearly they were not just visible, but in a very hands-on way, were actively involved in the community.

Eck: Absolutely they were. We actually tried in the mid-80s to get another Betty Ford Hospital here and use her name. And Betty was really a treat. People like Fred Green and Ed Rainey, you probably know they're good friends with them.

Smith: We've talked to Fred.

Eck: Okay, and he was helping us set up from this side. He was quite a business man and he had other people that he knew from out there, because they went back and forth to the desert. And Leonard Firestone and some other folks that were their friends were going to maybe help support getting this here. So, myself and Doris Kirchner who's actually now the CEO of our hospital, was actually, here as a COO of our hospital. At that time (she later went with Mike Shannon when he was president of Vail and then moved to the desert and started his KSL businesses). She became his HR person. Actually, she just retired and came back here. We needed a CEO and eventually she stepped up. But she and I were working from this side with Fred going back and forth with Betty. So, Doris and I flew out there one day and Betty looked at everything, we met John Schwarzlose and the whole crew out there. And every one of us said, "Yeah, we need to have this in Vail. We could use it. We had a clientele who could afford something like this." It almost seemed like a go.

And then Betty called apologetically about two weeks later and didn't talk to me personally but she talked to Doris. She said, "You know, I really want this going. It makes sense. It would go, but I just can't." And Doris said, "Well, anything we can do to help?" She says, "No, I know myself. If you'd known us when you're here visiting that day, I was up cleaning the tables and I was up putting things aside and if it has my name on it, I get too over involved and I have to make sure it's okay if it carries my name. And she said, "That takes an awful lot of time and I know if it was Vail I'm going to do the same thing in Vail." "And, I think," she said, "that would just wear me down." So that was the reason she backed out. But isn't that classic?

- Smith: It is classic, because I knew the issue existed of in effect franchising the name.
- Eck: And we wanted to be the pilot group because everything was in place. We had the same players that went back and forth.
- Smith: Again, if this is uncomfortable, you don't have to go there, but prior to the intervention that took place in '78 out there, did you sense a problem?
- Eck: No, I really didn't. I wasn't involved with them in that inner social circuit that they worked here. Again, I was in the background, even though I took care of all these same people they were with. I kept out so I didn't see it. I didn't have that contact. And I can't say I was surprised, not because of her specifically, but that whole group of folks that are high-end, I mean, they do a lot of partying at a different level and that's not to be critical or judgmental.
- Smith: Two things. One, you look at the political culture 40 years ago. People just drank a lot more than they do now.
- Eck: Oh, it was very different than now.
- Smith: And, secondly, I found it fascinating, when we went out to the desert to talk to people, that it was a particular problem with the elderly. That there were people who had retired out there, been very successful, very accomplished, and indeed often there was almost a connection between the more accomplished, the more successful, but that it was a problem that particularly afflicted people in their 'retirement years'.
- Eck: Well, even if people would have a tendency, at least in their working years, they wouldn't be at home or in a place they could do it except in the evenings or maybe an occasional cocktail at lunch if they did it. I mean, the worker bees wouldn't be allowed to do that, but they could discreetly do it because it was a business meeting. But once they had the freedom, there's vacant time out there. I mean, I can see why it would happen inadvertently - not that it was necessarily need - it's just tradition.
- Smith: Sense of humor? People who know her well know that she has a somewhat more ribald sense of humor than he did.

Eck: Yes, she does. I love that picture that came out after she left the White House where she's on the table. That black and white photo. I said, you know that's classic.

Smith: Free spirit.

Eck: Free spirit, yeah. He had a gentle sense of humor. He liked a ribald joke. He told me some jokes occasionally and we would share it. The first time I heard one, I thought "Geez, I don't know if it's protocol." But even patients I got to know after awhile because it's unique in an area like this - my patients were more like friends than patients. I didn't have to look in the chart to see who's walked in the door next. You're part of a community. So, he would share some of his jokes with me. But again, I just stay out of that because of our professional relationship.

Smith: In my eulogy, I mentioned the fact that most of us, as we get older, tend to become a little more conservative. Partly nostalgia for what was and also we have more to conserve. And that didn't seem to be the case with them. Some of it was the Republican Party moved further and further to the right on a lot of issues, particularly social issues. And I've often wondered, because, by the end of his life, they were sort of marooned within the party. A woman's right to choose was an obvious issue, but there were others, too. Gay rights. Issues that you wouldn't normally associate with a "conservative Republican" president. And I'm wondering how much of that was her influence on him. How much of it was just a kind of innate compassion that perhaps was intensified by the experience of the intervention and everything that followed? How much of it was maybe picked up from the surroundings out here? A little more libertarian, a little more liberal socially?

Eck: You know, he and I never talked much politics. Again, it was bantering, the social things about Vail. He always asked me questions about what's happening in Vail. The only time something 'political' came up was when Clinton was in the White House. Remember, because of inflation, the stock market, the world looked very rosy. And Clinton took the fact and he turned it around and we have a big surplus and we still had a trillion dollar debt, but it was on the books. And he was reading the newspaper and shaking it around

and said, “What do you think of all this, Jack?” which is the first time he asked me something like that. I said, “Well, you know, the economy, frankly, at times, it sucks. And he’s taking credit for a lot of this positive stuff.” And he said, “It’s interesting, I was made to look good and bad in the economy. Carter didn’t look good.” He talked about Reagan and his economics and turning around and, all of a sudden, Clinton came in and things look really rosy. Of course, that was before the 2000 crash. And he said, “You know, we’d like to take credit for when it’s good, but frankly, all you need to do is have Greenspan in your financial team. And we all looked at it that way.” In other words, the implication was, it didn’t matter what anybody did. The fact that Greenspan was there was the reason it did, even though the presidents take credit.

Smith: Do you think he was cautious about discussing politics with people? That he sort of held back a little bit from expressing opinions or raising subjects that might lend themselves—

Eck: Again, I wasn’t that involved in what he discussed with the President, because I was his doctor. We kept that distance. But he would occasionally come in. A lot of the old guard in town here had a Friday luncheon group called the No Name Luncheon Group and he would come over periodically and he was pretty open especially around people like Fred Green and Keith Brown and Bill Hanlon, you know, folks that he knew. And he was as wide open then as anybody could be. Within ourselves, ours was casual, it was social, it was light, it was personable on both sides, but I really didn’t get into politics with him. I’ve taken care of other presidents and vice presidents and ambassadors and foreign folks; I mean, they just kept referring me up not because I’m unique, I just happened to be in Vail where they came. But I saw a lot of these people and, first of all, I found out they’re like everybody else. And, frankly, they had the same gastrointestinal problems every other traveler has. Even though they looked very distinguished in front of these panels all over the world, they had diarrhea or constipation or anything or insomnia because of the jet lag. They’re human like everybody else. I got to know them there. So, nothing really transpired that much that could answer your question.

Smith: The altitude really wasn't a problem until near the end?

Eck: Yeah, I mean, over the years, I got to see some of the - particularly when he was here - some of the press folks, I remember Helen Thomas and some of the other folks here would have problems with the altitude. Some I didn't see, some my colleagues would see, but it did impact even some of the Secret Service, in fact, because they would be so macho, they didn't want to leave. A couple of the guys, there were some problems with certain blacks or Mediterranean people have that their blood cells actually change. Sickle cell trait, for instance, when they're at altitude and some of them were having trouble and wouldn't leave and finally you just have to get them out because they were so mission-oriented to be here that they didn't want to be a failure.

But the Fords never had that until near the end. But, again, they were in their 90s and they had a multiple set of problems and they would come in out of town frequently. If they would come and stay, you have to go through the acclimatization that's probably what you're feeling for three or four days and then all of a sudden you're okay. But leave town for a day and then come back - in and out - that's tough. That's really unique.

Smith: And obviously she loved this place as much as he did.

Eck: Oh, absolutely. She really did. And I know from talking to other people, she would be checking in with her Vail friends, many of them - Margie Burdick, who is in a nursing home, particularly - in Grand Junction. You've probably heard that name. Sheika and Donna Meyer. The whole cast of characters.

Smith: But they had a lot of friends here.

Eck: They had a lot of friends here and it wasn't just friends that were their friends because of who they were, but they were friends who were there before they were in the White House. Even at the time when he was just starting to get outside of being just a country lawyer and into the ranks of politics. So, the friendships went way back there. It wasn't just because they were special people because you and I have seen people who search out someone because of the person, they want to rub elbows. These were just down-home friends

that they would've had if they were back in Grand Rapids or Alexander or wherever they were.

Smith: Were you surprised at all by the extent of public reaction when he passed away? He'd been out of the public eye for awhile.

Eck: Yeah. You know, as I told you from how he made the decision to go to Mayo, I mean, that had still been in my mind. When he died, I had family for Christmas in town. I was invited to the private funeral in California and initially declined. However, the family and friends made sure that I was on a jet, my wife and I, to go out to the private funeral. We didn't want to go back to Washington. I'm not into the big stuff. But that's where I learned more because there was a couple hundred of us there and we viewed the casket and then we had a huge line which (I don't know if you were there), wound around the church waiting to see Betty who was sitting up in the high stool with Susan holding her up. But just her conversations as we all stood in line, most of us knew each other, showed the impact of the guy and how history treated his decision to pardon Nixon much better than he was looked at early on.

And I think that's a testimony to the man himself. First, of his courage to do it, because he knew it was going to sink him. He absolutely knew that. He had told me that on one occasion. He said, "I know this was going to get me, but we just had to get through it." And when I was in Vietnam, I was one of the country's killers when I came home. I came up here to Vail to get away for a year because I was 101st Airborne Division and saw a bunch of combat up there, even though I wasn't in most of the danger. A couple of times it was because I was a flight surgeon for a helicopter outfit. I wasn't in a hospital, so I knew what it was like to be on that side.

I was over there when Kent State happened. We didn't hear about it until a couple months later when the *Stars and Stripes*, which was managed news, frankly, came in and we didn't have cell phones. I called home once for my grandmother's 80th birthday, but I had to take a line on a phone by a telephone pole and try to get through, which was hard. So, we didn't have it, but I just felt isolated. And when I came back here, I didn't want people to know I'd

been there. So, we had a bond. He and I talked about the feelings about that a couple of times. He wondered what it was like. I said, "You know, I've got to tell you from me, personally, I felt ostracized internally. People like me as a person, but I didn't share that inside stuff. I didn't want people to know." I said, "You know, whatever you did there," and this is back in the 70s, I tell him, "I respect that. We had to get through that stuff." I was just tired of the race riots and the country being torn asunder, being in the midst of the action in 'Nam, being in the midst of the action.

I actually went back after my first year in Vail and started an orthopedic residency in Philadelphia. I left after four months because they were having their race riots that year. The Temple Medical School, they had cops surrounding the whole school, protecting. I mean, this was in '72, '73, '74. Just before I came that second time, which was when I interacted with him, I had to get out of there. Even though I had gone to medical school and knew my way around an urban area, it was terrifying. I said, "I just couldn't handle that after the 'Nam experience." So, I said, "from my experience, you had to nail it." And he just sort of shook his head at the time. Didn't say thanks for supporting, but it registered.

And then to stand in that line, I told my wife later, and listen to what people said, then to reflect back, he knew he did the right thing. He knew he was going to be getting it. I know it was bitter, because I think it got tight there between he and Carter near the end, but it was tight as far as when he knew he was going to lose. But the fact that I think he still felt an element of chance that he'd make it. I said, "That had to be just destructive." I never really went into that because I wanted to keep our relationship personal as a doctor. I don't know if I answered your question.

Smith: He said the most humiliating day of his presidency was to see the United States, after all of that blood and treasure and sacrifice, in effect, being kicked out of Southeast Asia.

Eck: Yeah, but on the other hand, I don't know if I ever impacted him the way I used my personal experience to say I was relieved he did it. And maybe it didn't matter, but if you think of the other people who happened by

coincidence to be in the riots or be involved in it, he saved us. We knew it. But no one else knew that until later.

Smith: And then the coda, in some ways his finest hour. Because the moment the helicopters took off, Congress wanted to pull the plug and forget that we'd ever been there. And he was adamant that we had a moral obligation to bring out as many of these refugees as we could. And, basically, he shamed Congress into living up to the original financial commitment.

Eck: He did.

Smith: One of the really moving things periods of my life at the museum, we managed to get the staircase that was on top of the U.S. Embassy that people went up to get in the helicopter. And not just American personnel, but thousands of Vietnamese. And Henry Kissinger said, "Why would you want to remind people of that?" And Ford, very interestingly, said, "First of all, Henry, it's part of our history, we shouldn't forget it." But, secondly, Ford saw that staircase, not as a symbol of military defeat, but as a symbol of the desire for freedom. Which takes a certain imagination that I don't think people always attributed to him.

Eck: And I didn't know this story until you just told me.

Smith: And so, not only did we get it, but he then came back to Grand Rapids and we invited the Vietnamese community of West Michigan, which is quite large, and there must have been 500 people and it was obviously a very bittersweet occasion. But who else would wish to be publically associated with the low point of their presidency? He came back from California and did the event and it was just overwhelming because some of those people who were there, went up to him and said, "I was one of the people who went up that staircase."

Eck: My gosh.

Smith: How do you think he should be remembered?

Eck: I think he should be remembered as a good guy, thoughtful, very humanistic. He was not a pushover. You could see the attributes of a good athlete play

Jack Eck

June 25, 2010

out in the decisions that he made and, frankly, I think he saved us from ourselves by making that big decision too which cost him the election.

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