

Gerald R. Ford Oral History Project
Joe Sweeney
Interviewed by
Richard Norton Smith
May 10, 2010

Smith: Thank you for doing this.

Sweeney: Oh, I'm flattered to do it, though I don't know if I have anything to say. To be candid with you, I don't really know if I do.

Smith: What does it feel like to be back in this office?

Sweeney: Well, it's changed, for one thing. But, yes, I was in this office when it was under construction and there was no furniture and there was no carpeting. It was built for President Ford and he has used it, but virtually not at all.

Smith: Did you have an expectation at that point in terms of what kind of use it might get?

Sweeney: No. I think everyone figured there had to be an office for him, but I think it was understood that he had his connections in Vail and Rancho Mirage and Washington and that he would never come back to Grand Rapids as a resident, and that this would not get an awful lot of use. But he was so revered that whatever anybody could do for him, they did do, friend or foe. And that's what this office really represents.

Smith: Well put. Was there local resentment when it was revealed at the end of his presidency that he wouldn't be coming back to Grand Rapids?

Sweeney: I never noticed it. I never heard about it. When he was defeated by Carter, by that time, I had already worked with him for probably almost a year. There was obviously the contingency that if he was not reelected or even if he was, that provision had to be made for his library and museum. And so, thought was going into it at that time. And again, the story is - I'm sure you've already heard about it - a fairly small group of local citizens put together something called the Gerald R. Ford Commemorative Committee. I don't mean to demean the contribution of other people, but there were probably five or six people that really did the job and I can mention who they were.

Smith: Sure.

Sweeney: Carl Morgenstern, who was the former chairman of the board and the CEO of Old Kent Bank; Jordan Shepherd, a builder and contractor primarily for high-end housing; David LaClaire who was a local portrait photographer; Dick Ford, of course, President Ford's brother; Fred Meijer of the Meijer food and department store chain; Harold Davidson, the managing partner at the Grand Rapids office of Ernst and Young; and myself. That was really the group that did this.

Smith: At that point, had a decision been made regarding Ann Arbor? Was this in any way a reaction to that? What did you know about the library?

Sweeney: At that point, I think that was a decision President Ford made himself, because he had two allegiances: clearly one to Ann Arbor, but clearly one to Grand Rapids. And I think it was a very creative decision. I don't know whether somebody else planted the idea or whether that came from him whole cloth. I can't tell you, Richard.

Smith: But isn't that what a congressman would do?

Sweeney: Right. Exactly. Tip O'Neill would do that. Exactly. By the way, when do these things you're doing get released?

Smith: Certainly nothing before 2013 and you can put any restrictions on it you want in part or in whole. We're much more interested in having a candid conversation.

Sweeney: Fine, I will give you candid information. And these are not things that came to me in my position as an attorney, so there's no attorney-client privilege involved and, even if there were, I really regard this interview process as part of my relationship with both the Commemorative Committee and the Foundation. There have been attempts since to try to integrate the library and museum at this location and I think you are aware of those because I think some of them were attempted, not necessarily under your auspices, but at the time when you were in charge of the library and museum. That has never gone anywhere and is not going to happen. The University of Michigan is

certainly not going to release its authority over the library. But there have been attempts by local individuals to try to see whether that could be arranged.

Smith: Do you know if any of those were discussed with him? I mean, was any of this during his lifetime?

Sweeney: Yes, it was discussed with him and it's not something that he encouraged. It's very interesting because one of the letters that went to him following my redrafting was a letter that went to the University of Michigan. I don't know if it was ever sent to the U of M. I think it was. I don't think Mary Sue Coleman was yet president, so it was probably under Lee Bollinger's time as president of U of M. But President Ford did not encourage the effort. He didn't say, "Don't do it." Again, the congressman, the facilitator, the great compromiser. But I don't think he was at all enthused about the prospect. That is my view of it, particularly with the Ford School of Public Policy now being part of the Ann Arbor campus and with his affiliation with the library. But there were serious thoughts and I don't think those thoughts will ever go away from certain individuals here.

But, here's the little story I started to tell you. My law firm, when President Ford was defeated for reelection, I remember attending a partners meeting. I don't think I was a partner yet, I actually started working with President Ford when I was still a fairly junior associate and it was something that came to me, not to the firm. But I remember the firm saying, "Well, let's invite President Ford to become a partner." And, of course, he very, very gracefully declined. I probably, at that point, knew President Ford and had a closer affiliation with him than anybody in the firm did, but, again, being a very junior attorney at that stage, I wasn't even consulted on the matter. So that's a little tidbit. And, of course, President Ford never did resume practicing law. He hadn't practiced law for 50 years.

Smith: How did your paths first cross?

Sweeney: You know, I was thinking about that on the way here, because I knew that question would come up. I know the first time I met President Ford was when

he came to Grand Rapids around Easter in 1976. Part of it was in connection with the library and museum, which we were just starting to really get formally organized. And it was probably just a friendly visit. But he stayed at Dr. Bob Brown's house. Dr. Brown is a member of the Commemorative Committee's board of trustees and was a good friend to President Ford with a home in East Grand Rapids. That's where I first met President Ford. In terms of how we crossed paths, because of my professional involvement as an attorney with the Commemorative Committee and what has followed, I'm not 100% certain why, other than I did do an awful lot of work with non-profit organizations, even at that stage of my practice.

I represented the Grand Rapids Arts Council, for example, and there were a number of others and, over the years, I've probably represented or been a trustee of 25 local charities of different types. So I think I got into it that way because they needed an attorney who had some experience with non-profits. They really needed to get a tax exemption, we needed to be incorporated, and it was really very much a grassroots effort. I wouldn't call it unprofessional, but we never had anybody that was paid staff throughout the entire process. I don't know that anyone other than our contractors ever asked for reimbursement of personal expenses during the entire process of constructing the museum and funding part of the construction of the library and the exhibits and so on.

It was a very interesting experience and really quite unique for somebody in my position. At one point, I was spending at least a day per week and often two days per week exclusively on this process. But it was very gratifying, very rewarding and I grew in my admiration for President Ford throughout the entire process.

Smith: Was it through the contacts you had with him or learning more about him?

Sweeney: A little bit of each. I mean, he was totally unpretentious. He didn't stand on a lot of ceremony. Plus you already knew his record. I've heard you and others deliver speeches about his character and integrity and never a hint of scandal or duplicity. And that just became more and more evident as we were putting together the exhibits and getting into the history of his congressional and

presidential years and time in the Navy and so on. You could not help but admire him at whatever distance you were involved with him. And I can't say that I had a real close involvement with him. I don't want to suggest that. I probably met with him during the development and construction period half a dozen times maybe.

Smith: How worried was he? Oddly enough, one of the things that brought him and Jimmy Carter together was their joint realization that they had to raise the money to build their presidential libraries.

Sweeney: Correct.

Smith: And, for someone who was accustomed to running, not unopposed, but essentially in a safe district, not spending a lot of money in congressional campaigns, one senses that it was a pretty daunting task, now you're a former president and the first thing you have to do is raise, whatever, \$9 million for this building and whatever over in Ann Arbor.

Sweeney: Right.

Smith: Was that something that weighed heavily on him?

Sweeney: I'm sure it did. He did participate in the fundraising. Carl Morgenstern very much was the prime mover of the fundraising effort. But President Ford did participate, particularly with people that he'd had long relationships. And there were some foreign governments that contributed significant amounts of money. He always was frugal. I don't even know whether he wanted this office. I think that he really did not want an awful lot of money put into furnishings and that sort of thing. But he was very active in the whole planning for the museum project. Very involved. We didn't really do much of anything without consulting with him in some fashion, not always face-to-face, but sending blueprints and materials to him. He really ended up making the decision on the architectural firm and on the fundamental design of the museum. We made a recommendation and it was certainly something that he accepted, but he had the ultimate approval. The statue out in front of the astronaut, he had ultimate approval on that.

Smith: Is it true that he didn't want a statue of himself?

Sweeney: Yes. I don't know whether it's still in this building, but there is the most gosh awful statue of President Ford. I don't know what I would compare it with, but it looked like something that maybe Andy Warhol and Picasso together would do. I wouldn't say Andy Warhol, but Picasso's in there. Anyway, it's a grotesque thing and I think that that was something that encouraged him even further to "Just don't bother."

Smith: Parenthetically, one of the great ironies of a congressman who wasn't noted for bringing home a lot of bacon to the district - the most obvious example where he really did involve himself in significant federal funding is the Calder sculpture which doesn't fit into the image we have of Gerald Ford. It may have been Dick Ford who, when there was discussion, made clear he [President Ford] didn't want a statue of himself [outside the Ford Museum] - the spaceman reflected his interests. And he said, "Whatever it is, make it representational art."

Sweeney: Yes. I'm sure that that spaceman statue, if you examine it closely, you can see the texture of the fabric. Boy, that was a project. I will never forget that. The sculpture was basically a fee plus expenses and he, Judd Nelson, would send his expense reports in - just a pile of receipts - and many times we had to tell him, "Stocking your liquor cabinet is not something that's included in the expenses of doing this sculpture." But he was good at what he did. He was.

Smith: Were there alternates considered to the spaceman?

Sweeney: Yes. Well, there were alternates considered to that and there was a lot of pressure from some local artists to have a keynote type sculpture and I personally received some pressure on that account. I don't know whether her name has been mentioned or whether you've interviewed her, but Mary Ann Keeler was involved. It is a Judson Nelson sculpture. I must give Judson credit for that. She was involved in that end of what we did. She was very much enamored of artistic types and she would be their advocate to make sure that we actually paid more than they asked and make sure that we didn't

question any of their expenses. She and Judson Nelson came up with his ultimate appointment.

Smith: Was she involved in the Calder sculpture?

Sweeney: Not terribly. That's Nancy Mulnix. I was involved years later. Nancy came to me, and I didn't know her at the time. Calder actually preceded my arrival in Grand Rapids, but we did do a follow-up on that. There was a Calder celebration and it must have been the 25th anniversary of its installation and we had the head of the National Endowment for the Arts here, Jane Alexander. But Nancy Mulnix was the prime mover in that. Very possibly, Mary Ann Keeler was involved somehow, but that really was a one-woman show. As a young woman, she pulled that off and deserves credit to this day.

Smith: Very impressive.

Sweeney: Yes, it is.

Smith: There must have been some local head scratching.

Sweeney: There was. And so was the painting on the roof of the county building, which was a Calder that he scratched out on an envelope and that ended up being modeled on the roof. Our law firm paid for it since we had the best view of it. We paid for it for years and, every two or three years, the county would want it refurbished.

You mentioned Jimmy Carter. I go back further with Jimmy Carter than I do with Ford and I got to watch that evolving relationship between them in a very interesting fashion. I met President Carter on at least two or three occasions. They would do joint appearances at Ann Arbor or elsewhere. My law school was Emory University in Atlanta, which of course is where the Carter Center is today. I was actually asked to get involved in the Carter Library-Museum. I never did, I figured one is enough. But since they knew I had experience here, I was asked to at least lend a helping hand with some documentation or something, but it didn't prove to be necessary. They obviously did a great job down there themselves.

Smith: I want to come back to that because that obviously is very important.

Let's talk about the site itself because I guess it's well known that Fred Meijer offered a site on the outskirts of town.

Sweeney: Yes, he offered a site up on Bradford, which is actually outside the city limits in the Grand Rapids Township. He felt it would be appropriate because Fred had the image of people coming here in droves. You know, families would come in their campers and busses would come up and we needed a large place for the parking. The parking was always just a huge issue. And, by the way, you're bringing up parking lot nightmares for me and, I think, in your time here, you probably remember some of my conversations about it. That issue here at the museum site is just being finally resolved, by the way, with an affidavit that I'll be filing in the records of the Kent County Registrar of Deeds within the next week.

Smith: In what way? Because you did end up with a lot of parking.

Sweeney: Far more than we needed, but we would've had even more because we started out with the site where the Grand Rapids Public Museum and Days Inn is located as part of the Ford Museum site. We had that property tied up through the city and we part swapped, part purchased it. We had a big controversy about a walkway from over the other side of Pearl to here so people wouldn't get killed trying to get to the museum from their parking. Well, we didn't have to go through with the walkway, obviously, because we're on one contiguous site.

But the property north of us was owned by a local furniture dealer, Robert Sullivan and some of his associates. He was big in local sports. He owned the local semi-pro baseball team, the Sullivans. We ended up giving up our rights to the property south of Pearl and we ended up getting the property north, which is the north parking lot. It cost us a good deal of money; probably, to be honest with you, more than it was worth. In fact, I'm certain of it. But it was just a matter of getting the job done. I remember Fred Meijer was doing some of the direct negotiation, and Bob Sullivan played really tough. He played hardball.

Smith: What is the status of the north parking lot today?

Sweeney: I will tell you and I'm going to try to keep this as brief as possible. The Commemorative Committee - the predecessor to the Foundation - endowed the Foundation with what money we had left over. We gave to the Gerald R. Ford Presidential Foundation and that became their initial endowment. The only property that we really had an immediate right to was the north parking lot, because the city wanted to make a big presentation at the time of the dedication. They wanted to be the ones that would turn over this property and the footprint of the museum to the GSA, the General Services Administration. At that time, the National Archives and the Presidential Library System were part of the General Services Administration. So we said, "Okay, fine. You go ahead and you give to the GSA."

As far as the north parking lot goes, rather than go through a series of transfers, we were going to have the owners of that property, meaning Bob Sullivan and his associates, transfer the property directly to the GSA. I ended up drafting the deeds that those owners used to give the property to the GSA along with some other documentation that had to be filed. I offered to the GSA to record the documents so we have a clear record title. Instead, they wanted to hire a title company here to oversee the process for them and I ended up sending the deeds to that title company. Those deeds have never since seen the light of day. I know what happened to them. The title company sent them to the GSA and the GSA put them in a drawer somewhere. The GSA insisted on looking at them before they were actually recorded. So, at that point, and I remember it and I've got correspondence and phone records where I told the GSA, "Why don't you get this thing recorded and get it done? I'm finished. I'm done with the Commemorative Committee. I'm not going to work on this anymore."

It sat in limbo for many years until the Foundation felt this is a valuable piece of property. We can have that parking lot. I think you were involved at that stage. And, Richard, you are probably less patient with lawyers than anybody that I know because, frankly, you're part of the problem and I'll tell you why you're part of the problem. I came up with a trust agreement between the Foundation and the archivist about how we were going to get that parking lot. We were going to make some money off it and we had some freedom to use

it. The Archives were happy with it. They were going to do it. But it required an act of Congress to transfer the property to the Foundation.

Smith: Can I interrupt? I want to ask you, because it's all coming back to me, but because of the fact that the documentation had been sent to GSA and never recorded, did you ever lose ownership of it?

Sweeney: We never had ownership. The owners were still Bob Sullivan and his associates, as far as the record title was concerned. Now, I recorded a memorandum of our land contract which showed that we were purchasing it. I recorded the transfer of our land contract interest to the GSA. But the GSA just sat on the whole thing. And so, we had to get Vern Ehlers involved to transfer this property. And, of course, I already knew the title was not clear, but Vern Ehlers insisted on the Right of Reverter and, if you remember, the property had been appraised with a value of one dollar. The Foundation hired an appraiser to tell us after the act of Congress that, by giving this property to the Foundation with Vern Ehler's Right of Reverter, it is, as a marketable instrument, worthless. As a possible use, as long as we don't change the use, we can continue to use it as a parking lot. If we do anything else with it, we have to get the permission of the Archives and so on. But, I know the GSA had the documents because I've talked to their lawyer in Chicago 20-25 years ago, whenever it was, and I don't think they ever sent them to the Archives in Washington when the Presidential Library System was spun off. I think they may have, but I doubt it.

So they're sitting in a file in Chicago. But my affidavit will clear the title because we have an act of Congress transferring the property to the Foundation and, frankly, an act of Congress is even better than my affidavit. So, we're in business. If anybody is interested, they should look at the file for the museum's north parking lot at the Ken County Register of Deeds. The affidavit gives the full story.

Smith: But it must be used as a parking lot.

- Sweeney: Yes, basically. It's the most aggravating set of issues I've ever dealt with in my over 35 years of legal practice. Frustrating. It's just frustrating. And you were part of my frustration, just so you know that. I remember.
- Smith: And my motives were pure. I wanted to get access.
- Sweeney: And you wanted a one page agreement and I said, "It's not going to work that way, Richard."
- Smith: I knew that intellectually.
- Sweeney: Okay. But, anyway, that's the state of it. Whatever happens.
- Smith: Was there real debate about choosing this site?
- Sweeney: Oh, yes, absolutely. Because, again, Fred Meijer wanted the site out on Bradford, but this was so logical in so many ways. There was a lot of controversy, though.
- Smith: And what was on the site at the time?
- Sweeney: At the time, the city owned part of the property and there were some abandoned buildings that the city had already condemned. The most controversial part of the entire acquisition was something called the Little Red Schoolhouse which was owned by Monarch Machinery, the Jackaboise family. That was where, apparently, and I'm not sure if this part is true, but I think it's true, that it is where they actually started Monarch Machinery, in this little red barn. And the city was condemning it by means of eminent domain for a public purpose so it would become part of the site. I'll never forget. I was in my partner John Logee's office. John was mayor of Grand Rapids for quite a few years, I don't know how many. But I was there the afternoon or whatever time of day it was when the Little Red Schoolhouse burned down. And Susie Logee, the mayor's wife, was in the office with me and she virtually accused the Commemorative Committee and me in particular, of burning down the Little Red Schoolhouse so we could get the property for our museum. But there was nothing terribly useful here other than, where the north parking lot is, there were several storefronts.

Smith: We've been told that there were some people who saw it as inadequate. It really required an active imagination to envision what it might be. Was there in fact, in addition to Fred's offer, concern that "Why do you want to put this facility here?"

Sweeney: Sure, from a commercial level, it's not the highest and best use. I mean, you can do other things commercially with it. But again, the Public Museum is not the most economic use of that property either. Obviously, it's become an attraction for the rest of downtown and I think on a net basis, it was a very appropriate decision, even on an economic basis. But, yes, there were people that thought, first of all, that we were really being piggish to insist on all this parking place, which, again, the museum does not need. We understand that. But this was something that probably Fred Meijer and Dick Ford were most adamant about. "We are going to have parking space." And so we got it.

Smith: The other thing that is hard to imagine today, but if you go back 30-40 years, there was on the part of many people a real reluctance to come downtown.

Sweeney: Yes, that's true.

Smith: And presumably, this was before the city had rediscovered the river. Launching a renaissance.

Sweeney: Yes, that's true.

Smith: Which leads to the question of, and again I don't want to overstate it, but how much of a catalyst was this institution in terms of what has transpired since?

Sweeney: I don't want to overstate it either, but I think it certainly was a major catalyst. I think that it made possible the public museum across the road. Otherwise, I don't know where it would've been other than its old location, which was really hopeless from an expansion point of view and a facility point of view. I think it's been a lure to Grand Valley, another public institution, to locate where it has. And that renaissance, to use your term, is continuing. I think it was a major influence. I really do.

Smith: I mean, for example, the impetus for the hotel and everything.

Sweeney: Absolutely, because the dedication of the museum occurred in conjunction of the dedication of the revised Amway, the old – now I'm even forgetting what it was.

Smith: The Pantlind.

Sweeney: The Pantlind. Exactly. That occurred simultaneously. That was the same period of time.

Smith: And was a burial site always part of the package?

Sweeney: Yes. Well, I shouldn't say that, but certainly by the time we broke ground, it was envisioned in that location.

Smith: We'll be talking to Marvin Dewinter tomorrow, but – and I guess there's always controversy about this sort of thing - was there controversy about the design of the building?

Sweeney: Sure. We had a number of architectural firms submit designs. What goes with that, particularly in the local community, is you do get controversy and you do get pressure. But Marv came up with what was clearly the most creative and, from my standpoint and I think the other members of the committee, the most attractive alternative. He was very persuasive in our meetings with him and he stuck by his original plan to a very large extent. There was very little that anyone could do to move him off of his design. We were coordinating that with a group that you're probably familiar with, Staples and Charles, who was the design firm for the exhibits. So, we had to coordinate all that together. But Marv did a very good job for us. He really did. And I have to mention the contractor, too, Owen Ames Kimball, an outstanding contractor. They happen to have been my client, but that had nothing to do with their selection as the contractor. But we did have outside people, outside of Grand Rapids, try to bid on some of these major parts, but we stuck with our choices and we felt we made the right decision.

Smith: It's a very interesting building. It's unconventional in some ways without being avant garde.

- Sweeney: Oh, yes, that was all conscious on Marv's part. You can verify that tomorrow. President Ford endorsed it without a lot of concern. I remember Marv brought his model in and it was not a terribly fancy model of the building. My recollection is that he used a mirror or something that was on the model to show the river. But that was certainly a major part of the consideration. Right out in front here, Ah-Nab-Awen Park, I believe it's called, was a sacred site to the Indians. So that all had to be preserved as part of the construction process. And the city did retain title to that park by the riverfront.
- Smith: Were there obvious question raised about the design? Having been through this process several times, it's always struck me as in some ways. You've got a local group with enormous enthusiasm and commitment, willing to do whatever it takes, but without the kind of necessary experience. I mean, you don't build a presidential library all the time.
- Sweeney: True.
- Smith: And they're unique institutions that have unique requirements and museums and so on and so on. And finding the right mix of professional experience with the grass roots enthusiasm and commitment—
- Sweeney: First of all, Jordan Shepherd was a builder. Jordan Shepherd was the chairman of the Gerald R. Ford Commemorative Committee. He knew construction. He knew design. There were a hundred times - more than that - two hundred times, where Jordan contributed something that none of the rest of us would have considered. For example, when we were going to be putting the asphalt on the parking lots, he insisted that every bit of foundation or surface that had been there before, either be removed or pulverized, so there would not be a water table that could damage the asphalt. I mean, that's just one example. The discussions about the elevator, the discussions about the windows, this is not necessarily the best use of space, I suppose a circle or square does better than this triangle kind of construction. You can look at that corner there, you have a plant there, but it's really not the best use of space, but everybody, I think, was quite enthusiastic about the fundamental design. I really do.

- Smith: I guess what I was trying to say is that it's a dramatic building without being over the top.
- Sweeney: You're absolutely right. And I think that Marv took into account the concern about, you know, we're basically still a conservative community and most of the people on our Commemorative Committee were business people and fairly conservative themselves. So, I think he pushed the envelope, but he didn't rip it open.
- Smith: Well put. I imagine there had to be concerns about cost. Did they reach the point where there were any significant modifications made during the design process?
- Sweeney: On cost factors?
- Smith: For example, NARA wishes, in retrospect, that they hadn't put the fountain in. In fact, I think it's almost an unwritten rule now that presidential libraries don't have water features.
- Sweeney: Really? I didn't know that. Yeah, that was expensive, but we were prepared to spend more. I mean, the walkway would've cost a small fortune. You know, let me put it this way. Yes, there were concerns about finishes and so on, but I don't believe that we ever compromised the fundamental structure or the design concepts. We got the conceptual design, which normally is one of the earlier parts of an architectural and construction contract, and I was responsible for that contract with Marv Dewinter and also with Evan Ames Kimball. I can remember we did have an issue about change orders, but they were relatively few given the size of the project. And again, as you said, we didn't have the staff. Nobody was getting paid for our end of it. We did have, and he was very helpful, Will Jones, who I think he might've been with the U.S. Information Agency before he went to the Archives. He was the Archives point person on this project. He became the first Executive Director of the Museum and Library, so he had an institutional orientation that was also very helpful to us. But, no, I think we took the design and we did it the right way without major compromise.
- Smith: The design of the gravesite, was that kind of always—

Sweeney: I don't know how much Marv Dewinter had to do with that. I can't remember that detail. Dave LeClaire, being a photographer and involved in the arts also, was involved in the discussions about the architecture, too, and had a good sense of it. He really did.

Smith: Now, President Ford was clearly a fiscal conservative.

Sweeney: Yes.

Smith: I think it's safe to say that none of you or him at that point envisioned an endowment, for example, growing to what it is today.

Sweeney: I think that's true and I think that at that point in time, I can't say we had a lot of confidence in the National Archives to continue to support this place. It was a turnkey operation, as you know. We had to turn it over to GSA without them making a major contribution themselves. We did have some money. I can't remember how much we had. I'm guessing it was in the hundreds of thousands rather than the millions that we had left over, but when you look at what's happening with museums today, I read that George W. Bush is looking to raise \$500 million. I mean, that's several orders of magnitude beyond what we were looking at and a lot of our contributions were relatively modest. They really were. We worked hard.

Smith: The concept of a museum that, in addition to the permanent exhibit, would have programs and temporary exhibits. Was that not factored in at the outset, or was it imagined but on a more modest scale?

Sweeney: I think it was envisioned primarily by Staples and Charles, the design people, and also Will Jones. We did have this very large first floor space that has been given to the temporary type exhibit in addition to the core exhibit. So, I would say, yes, it was contemplated.

Smith: How did President Ford's fiscal conservatism manifest itself?

Sweeney: We didn't spend that much money. We really didn't. I think he was very pleased with how things went. He did not want a cathedral to Gerald R. Ford built. That was not what he was looking for. In fact, I can remember when we came up with our statement of purpose for the IRS application for tax

exemption and the articles of incorporation and things like that, I think he was a little embarrassed about some of the language - that we were memorializing the life and times of Gerald R. Ford. He was interested in it from a historic perspective. And, I'll tell you, one of the things that he insisted on, and sometimes with the opposition of Betty, was that he wanted the truth. He did not want this to be some sort of paean to him and it wasn't. He wanted the helicopter exhibit from when they had to take the people from Saigon, the very last hold outs when we lost the war in Vietnam. He wanted things like that shown. He did not want to sugarcoat the Nixon resignation. And so, this museum - and I've been to many others, even some of the really old, old ones that aren't really museums, you know, James K. Polk, Rutherford B. Hayes, Calvin Coolidge - this one is reality and, again, you deserve part of the credit for that.

Smith: I know what you mean in that it reflects his character and his view of history.

Sweeney: Yes, absolutely.

Smith: Did he change over time?

Sweeney: Yes. He changed over time in the sense that he did get a lot older but he never became less gracious. I did notice in his last, I would say, 18 months or two years, there was a noticeable loss of vitality and mental acuity. I remember, and I think you might have been Executive Director at the time, that his last appearance before the Washington Press Club did not include a question and answer period. He was under stress, but he was a very elderly man. He was still very fit, but he had some health issues. Those are the changes. But other than that, no. He was unpretentious as president. He was unpretentious as a former president.

Smith: One thing that struck me as curious, and I actually made reference to it in the eulogy, traditionally and stereotypically, we tend to become more conservative as we get older. I found that he, in some ways, defied that. Maybe part of that was that the party went so far to the Right, but, you know, he was very open and tolerant. I've often wondered how much was Betty's influence upon him.

Sweeney: Could be.

Smith: In that sense, he seemed a somewhat different figure from what he'd been in the White House.

Sweeney: Yeah, he may have done a John Paul Stevens on us to some degree, because that was his appointment. I should mention one thing about fiscal conservatism that you'll find interesting and you may already know it. But I remember when there was the big run up of stocks during the high tech bubble and all of these funds were just making multiple returns of two digits, 20%, and so on. Well, of course, we had a fairly conservative investment portfolio. And, of all people, he and Fred Meijer said, "Let's forget about these fixed income things. Let's go into equities." Far beyond what I as an attorney representing a non-profit would say was prudent. And, of course, we got burned pretty badly when the bubble burst. Now, that's all been restored. We've diversified quite a bit, but President Ford went along with that. He was happy to go ahead and jump into the swimming pool with everybody else. And that's contrary to what a fiscal conservative would normally do. But he endorsed that decision.

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

Sweeney: Yes, a little bit. It was a real outpouring. It was incredible. Yeah, I was. The visitations, the funeral procession from the church to here and to the church. Yes, very much so. I think it was much more profound here locally than it was nationally. That was my impression. I could be wrong. But he really touched an awful lot of people in this community and in West Michigan. He really did.

Smith: How do you think he should be remembered?

Sweeney: By your eulogy. I'm not patronizing you; I mean that very sincerely. I think it was a remarkable document, a remarkable piece of literature. I think he should be remembered, first of all, as a good human being who had compassion. He was far more intelligent than people ever gave him credit for. He had wisdom, great character. Plus, one heck of a politician. He may not have been a politician of the stripe of Lyndon Johnson or Joe Cannon or Huey

Long, as you mentioned earlier, but he got things done. We could use some Jerry Fords today.

Smith: I've often wondered about the notion that he was without guile, because it should not mean that he was without calculation or ambition. And I've often wondered if he rather shrewdly put to use his reputation as 'good old Jerry Ford' and was underestimated.

Sweeney: I'm certain, Richard. I'm certain. I mean, Yale Law School, University of Michigan. He was no dummy. I think he was very shrewd. There were a lot of issues that came up involving individuals where a decision had to be made, you know, 'Is this the right way to approach this person for money?' or 'Is the right way to handle this controversy?' He had great common sense and great instincts and we ran into a lot of those. I couldn't recite them all for you. I guess I mentioned a couple.

Smith: I remember one. It showed a vulnerability that you did not often see. At one point, he had asked Walter Annenberg for something, a fairly significant gift, but certainly within Walter Annenberg's means. Annenberg turned him down and Ford was very burned by that. There was something very personal about that and he said, "I'm never going to do that again." I mean, it was an unpleasant experience.

Sweeney: I don't think he liked to solicit money. I don't know that very many people do. I mean, Bob Hooker does. Peter Secchia does. You know, those two guys. But I don't think President Ford was ever terribly comfortable and I also think that when he did solicitations, like from Mr. Max Fischer, for example, I think they understood his discomfort and I think it was very difficult to say no to him because they did know how difficult it was. So there was some compassion there and that probably served to his advantage, too, although that was not calculating. I think it was difficult for him. I do. Bob Hope turned us down, speaking of that, with all of his millions. I mean, Bob Hope, he gave us maybe a little bit, but probably what the little old ladies in church gave us, but he was a good friend of President Ford. I don't know that President Ford ever directly asked him for money. Including all of the Foundation years. But Bob Hope held onto it.

Smith: My theory was he believed he would take it with him.

Sweeney: I think you're right. Yes.

Smith: It's interesting that you made reference to the last speech he did in Washington. Because he was very dissatisfied with himself and said the next day, "That's the last speech I'm giving." And I think part of that he had seen Bob Hope's very public decline.

Sweeney: Yes. I think you're right.

Smith: I think it was a cautionary lesson. It got to the point where Delores was dragging him out. It was painful in the circle to see.

Sweeney: It was.

Smith: You'd have to be pretty insensitive to have that not make an impression.

Sweeney: Yes, and they were close. President Ford never embarrassed himself. Nobody felt embarrassed for him. Yes, that last presentation was a difficult one for him, but I think that, again, given his age and everything else. There were some things that he did contemporaneously that were taped for television or other purposes, where he still showed real intelligence and mental acuity.

Smith: And to the end he remained very proud of this place.

Sweeney: Yes he did.

Smith: For all that he was modest about it, pride co-existed with the modesty.

Sweeney: Yes.

Smith: Perfect. Thank you.

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