

Gerald R. Ford Oral History Project
Linda Burba
Interviewed by
Richard Norton Smith
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Smith: First of all, thank you for doing this.

Burba: It's my pleasure.

Smith: When I talked to your dad, I was struck by a number of things. But I guess maybe, most of all, by the fact that he said, "You may find this strange, Richard, but I really made a point when I was around Jerry not to talk politics."

Burba: Absolutely true.

Smith: Because everyone around Jerry wanted to talk politics. Most of them wanted something. He said he'd seen people follow him into the water at the lake. And so he almost created a politics-free zone.

Burba: Absolutely. To add to that, and to emphasize that, when Jerry was president, two weeks after he pardoned Nixon, we had already been invited to spend the weekend at the White House; my mother, my father, my husband, myself, and my sister and my brother. The pardon was so fresh, and I had a lot of questions. I didn't understand it because he'd enjoyed such great popularity, and we were so thrilled, and then suddenly he was being lambasted. I so distinctly remember as if it were yesterday, Dad saying to us on the way out to the airport, "*Nobody* is to ask your uncle about the pardon." And I remember saying, "But, Dad, you know, why can't we do that? It's just family." And he said, "Because that is *his* house, and you don't walk into somebody's house and ask them about something that has to do with their business, anymore than I would expect somebody to walk into my house and inquire about a business decision I made."

I can remember sitting in the family quarters dining room, and to the right of my Uncle Jerry. Uncle Jerry was at the head and Aunt Betty was at the head, and Dad was right across from me. Somehow, somebody, at the table, very

innocently brought up politics in a general sense. And I can remember my father just glaring at me, unspoken, "Don't say a word." And we never did, but that stuck with me.

I know that they talked golf. I was present when Dad would be in Florida and Jerry would be in Vail, or whatever, and they would talk on the phone and never, ever, was there any discussion about politics. It was golf. And when Dad was still running Ford Paint and Varnish, Jerry never asked him how business was going.

Smith: Really?

Burba: They talked about things that they had in common, be it friends, golf certainly was a passion, family, but that is very, very clear in my mind.

Smith: Am I correct in assuming that that applied to the other brothers as well?

Burba: I don't know.

Smith: Okay.

Burba: I truly don't know. I believe in my heart that my dad and my Uncle Jerry were the closest of the four. Even though, for a period of time Tom lived in town and Jim lived in town, certainly until his death. It's not to say that Dad didn't love all of his brothers, but the similarities between the two, the facial expressions, their sense of moral compass, they just were very, very close. And I don't know if that closeness existed throughout their lives, I don't know. But certainly I saw that after Tom died, I saw the closeness more; and then even more so after Jim died. But I always saw the similarities between the two.

Smith: Let me go back. Did you know your grandparents?

Burba: Oh, yes. I live two houses away from the house.

Smith: Tell me about them.

- Burba: I just adored my Grandfather Ford, I absolutely adored him. My Grandmother Ford was a very stern, stoic woman. She was not as approachable as my grandfather, so I think therein lies my feeling of being closer to him.
- Smith: Was she driven? You hear the stories about when she died they found the calendar book was full for however many...
- Burba: She did an incredible amount of volunteer work. Now, I wasn't necessarily cognizant of that at the time growing up. I certainly learned about that later. And as I read more about her - it wasn't discussed that she had left her first husband because he beat her. We didn't know about that. You didn't talk about that.
- Smith: How did you find out about that?
- Burba: Oh, I think reading it in a book. I certainly was never told. I do remember that she made holidays, Christmas, especially, fabulous. And she took great pride in making sure that the family was altogether for Christmas. Always setting the table beautifully, and making sure that everybody - the girls, especially, not the boys because I didn't really pay attention to the boy cousins, but the girls always had something that they had requested from Santa underneath the tree. So, it's her approachability to me that was a little bit standoffish, and that could be through a child's eyes. If I met her as an adult I might not have had that same impression.
- Smith: And when I say driven, I guess that's a poor choice of words...
- Burba: Very strong.
- Smith: ...but you get a sense of someone who was incredibly organized, and always active.
- Burba: Very. Absolutely, no question about that.
- Smith: And you wonder whether some of that was passed onto...

Burba: Absolutely. I think she was the stronger of the two in the family sense. I think my grandfather deferred to her, that's the impression I had. He was just this warm, fuzzy person.

Smith: Almost a role reversal.

Burba: Exactly. Now, when he spoke, and if he was upset, one listened immediately, and one never repeated, perhaps, something that they had done wrong. They had a little parakeet, and if you accidentally, without thought, opened a door and the parakeet had been flying around, you were told never, in no uncertain terms, to ever do that again. And you listened and you remembered, and you didn't do it again. So, it wasn't as if he was a Casper Milquetoast, but he left the running of the house to her. But I do have a cute story about him. It's just a personal story.

To this day, I hate rhubarb. And I can thank him for that because I can remember the house on San Lucia, walking into the backdoor, which is by the driveway. You'd walk into the laundry area, then you'd walk straight into the kitchen-breakfast area. I walked in one day, I was probably nine or ten, and my Grandfather Ford was sitting in a chair and he was munching on what I thought looked like a stalk of celery. So I walked over to him and I said, "Grandpa, can I have a taste?" And he said, "Oh, you don't want this." I said, "Well, yes, I do." "No, you don't." "Yes, I do." So he said, "Okay, fine. Here, but if you take it, if you take a bite, you're going to have to swallow it and eat it. You cannot spit it out." Well, I did, and I later learned that it was uncooked rhubarb. And to this day, I don't...I mean, somebody will say, "Well, it's a really sweet pie," and I'll go, "No, no, no. I don't care to have any rhubarb at all." So that is as if it were yesterday, I remember that about him. I always remember him smiling.

Smith: Happy man?

Burba: Oh, yes. That's my recollection of him, absolutely.

Smith: Now, were they both active in church?

Burba: You know, I don't know that.

Smith: One senses that she was.

Burba: I think that she was involved in guilds, I think he was involved as far as being present on Sunday, with the collection plate – that kind of thing.

Smith: But they were both churchgoers.

Burba: And certainly very involved in Grace Episcopal Church. That's my recollection because that's where I was baptized, that's where I grew up, that's where my parents were married, etc., etc. The roots ran deep.

Smith: The influence of the Calvinist tradition in West Michigan – clearly, your family was raised with a lot of conservative tenets, individual responsibility, fiscal conservatism, just a whole lot of [unintelligible]. How did that compare with the values or the enforcement, if you will, of the values from the Dutch Reformed? I'm trying to get a sense of – are there two sort of streams here, flowing along next to each other – or are they really one and the same? The Sabbath, for example, the very strict Sabbatarian elements of Dutch Reformed...

Burba: I was going to say that I can't relate to that because we didn't have those types of restrictions. We were allowed to go to movies, we learned how to dance, we could do what we wanted on Sunday. You certainly went to church on Sunday. But, you know, there weren't those kinds of restrictions. I would say that the similarity was the Ten Commandments. That, to me, that was how I was raised. The fact that some of those involved churchgoing, that the parallel to me between those who were raised in Hudsonville, for example, and those of us who were raised in East Grand Rapids, the parallel is the Ten Commandments.

Smith: Okay, that's perfect.

And the old line about: work hard, tell the truth, and come to dinner on time, is absolutely valid?

Burba: Standard. That's how I was raised. Yes. The consequences for not telling the truth, and also accountability – accountability, giving back if you were lucky enough to be blessed with - whether it was a talent or financial blessings – that you gave back to the community in some manner.

Smith: How was this communicated? Verbally, by precept, by example, by some combination?

Burba: All. All of the above. For my father, he was very involved in Kiwanis Club, Boys Club, Lions - I think it was the Lions Club - I think that's what it was called. But all of us at Christmas time, my sister, my brother, myself, at different times in our lives, at Christmas time we had to accompany my father when he would go out and deliver things to people who were underprivileged, so that we could gain a sense of, not everybody is as fortunate.

My first job: there was a store, at that time a very expensive, elitist store in East Grand Rapids, and it was two doors down from the high school. Everybody shopped there – *everybody* shopped there – and there was a sweater there that I coveted. At that time it was forty dollars. This was back in the Sixties, and I said to Dad, "I'd really like that sweater," and he said, "Well, do you have forty dollars?" I said, "No." He said, "Well, then you go find a way to earn it." I said, "Dad, there's nothing – I'm not sixteen yet, I can't drive..." He said, "Well, I'll tell you what I'll do. Every Saturday morning I'll take you over to the plant and we'll find something for you to do and you can earn the money for the sweater." I said, "Okay."

And I'm thinking, oh well, what can I do at the plant, this will be a piece of cake – I'll do bookwork or something. He had me clean the toilets at Ford Paint and Varnish to recognize how hard people have to work for their money, and then, by the time I got the forty dollars, I still wanted the sweater, but it meant more. So he led by example, and I know that that's how my uncle, I know that's how my cousins were raised, too. So that message was obviously set either verbally or by example, or both, to all the brothers.

Smith: Great story. Tell me, I'm confused because I was talking to your dad and I was trying to piece together the sequence of events, and it's always been a little bit fuzzy to me in terms of when the Depression came along, and the business was just opening and struggling, obviously.

Burba: Oh, very much so.

Smith: Did they lose their house and move to another, more modest house? I'm trying to get a sense of the sequence.

Burba: I don't know whether they lost the house that they were living in at that time. Dad would have been so young, too.

Smith: That's right.

Burba: He really would have been.

Smith: Were they in East Grand Rapids and then moved?

Burba: No. I know that they were in the city of Grand Rapids. I don't know which house at that time. My first recollection of knowing how that all transpired, was in reading about it. Specifically in conjunction when Jerry found out he was adopted. That Leslie King drove in from Detroit in the big Cadillac and where Jerry was working at the time was the little restaurant that we used to go down to for breakfast. So, suddenly it all was like, click, click, click.

Smith: It had not been discussed in the family?

Burba: No. Never, never. I think, and I've never asked Dad why, I don't think it was discussed with them. I truly don't. I'm assuming that, but to us finding out...he had my grandfather's name. He looked like my grandparents. So there would be no reason to tell any children growing up, "Well, he's our stepbrother." I don't think any of the brothers ever considered Jerry anything but a full brother. I really don't. He had their father's name and I think my grandfather adopted my uncle when he was around two years old, he was quite young. He never really knew his biological father. And the times were such, very little was ever discussed in front of children.

Smith: I'm sure.

Burba: But I never grew up knowing, knowing that he was not their brother.

Smith: And the conditions surrounding Dorothy's decision to leave Omaha, I'm sure would have been kept under wraps.

Burba: Exactly. Very much so. Because at the time, that would have been shameful, as opposed to being courageous.

Smith: So you never heard her discuss any of that?

Burba: Never. It would have been fascinating. I truly wish the times would have allowed for that, for all of us to have known, because I would have loved to have asked her about it. I think that is a fascinating story in the sense of the amount of courage that it took for her to do that at that time. There are women today that don't do it. She was ahead of her time in many ways.

Smith: I always thought it gave the president – most people never knew it – and in today's political climate, frankly, it could have been exploited. But, I think it did give him some kind of insight into other people who have had problems in their early lives, often through no fault of their own. An empathy.

Burba: Absolutely.

Smith: It is always associated with the kind of conservative that he was.

Burba: Exactly, and I always thought of him as a conservative as far as spending, but a moderate otherwise. I think the empathy factor probably – the insight as to what his mother had gone through, probably he, as a male and that generation, that probably gave him more empathy.

Smith: You know, that's interesting, because he clearly had, and part of it found expression in, I think, a lifelong contempt for his birth father.

Burba: Yes.

- Smith: And the fact that - and some of it was legalistic - the fact that Leslie King didn't pay what the court told him to pay. But behind that was a burning resentment.
- Burba: Oh, yes. And as with my father, you were taught, truly, if you didn't have something nice to say about anybody, you were better served to say nothing.
- Smith: It's interesting that you say that, because that's one of the things that set Ford apart. Politicians, as a class, love to gossip.
- Burba: Mean-spirited, too.
- Smith: And it's not just political gossip, they just will gossip. And he stood out. It took a while, but I noticed he had a very deft way of changing the subject if people started talking about personalities, and it often could get mean or ugly. He would find a way to veer off in another direction. I've had this confirmed from Penny and other people who made it clear that, particularly in an office full of women, he just didn't want it.
- Burba: I can remember when the museum was dedicated and the entire city of Washington was here. It was a security nightmare because you had the president, the vice president, you had the secretary of state, you had the head of the Senate. At the time, I wasn't really thinking about it, until you looked around and saw them all there, in one spot, at one point, in hindsight, it's frightening. And I can remember going to some restaurant downtown here that has since gone out of business, I can't even remember the name of it. Tip O'Neill was sitting at a table by himself and I said to my cousins - I had this program from the ceremony - I said, "You know, I really want his autograph." And they said, "You can't go over there and bother him." And I said, "You know what? I'm going to go over and introduce myself. I'm not going to ask for his autograph, and I'm going to thank him for coming. And depending upon how I'm received, if he wants to be alone, then I'll leave."
- So they all sat there and I kind of discretely put my program behind me and I walked over and introduced myself. He was one of the most gracious men - he stood up and thanked me for introducing myself, and proceeded to tell me

how fond he was of my uncle, etc., etc. At that time there wasn't, besides Ted Kennedy, there wasn't a more liberal Democrat. He was Speaker of the House at the time, I believe, and I'll never forget this. He had all these accolades to say about my uncle, and he said, "Your uncle and I may be adversaries Monday through Friday, but we have never been enemies, and on Saturday morning at nine o'clock, we're at the first tee at Burning Tree for golf." And I've never forgotten it.

I've looked back on that and thought, so many times, that's the two party system. That's how they work together. It was just more insight. I knew the good things about him. I knew the things he tried to do. I knew his moral compass, I knew where he came from. But to hear that from the Speaker of the House who was so highly respected, was just very enlightening to me.

Smith: And it's a bygone culture.

Burba: Yes.

Smith: He used to, when he was in the House, he and Hale Boggs would debate each other at the National Press Club. They'd get in the car, they'd drive down together to the Press Club and decide along the way what they were going to debate that day. And they'd have their debate and then they'd go have a drink and lunch and go back to lunch. It was just a much more civilized culture.

Burba: Absolutely. When I went to Washington in 1965 with a girlfriend of mine, and of course, we didn't go alone; Dad took us. We didn't stay at Betty and Jerry's house. At that time he was Minority Leader of the House, and he had arranged for us to have a tour of the Senate while it was in session, which at that time, it was very, very special. Then we took a tour of Mt. Vernon, etc., etc. And he, as House Minority Leader, had a car that was provided to him. Now I didn't know that. I thought he'd just arranged for this limo and this driver to take us around. Well, he did, but it was his. I can remember thinking, well, this is really special, this is really nice. But I do remember it being just so civil there.

And then going to their house in Alexandria for dinner one night, and it's a faint recollection, that we were talking about our day and what we had seen and what we had done, da da. And, of course, it was old hat to my cousins, and we were pointing out things that we had done, etc., and he had this huge grin on his face because we were seeing it for the first time, and we were old enough, we were fifteen, sixteen years old, so we were old enough to really get a grasp of what we were experiencing. And I remember him saying that, at that time, that all he aspired to – it was the first time I'd ever heard it stated – all I ever want to be is Speaker of the House. That's the only time I think I ever heard him mention politics. And I don't remember in what context, just in general conversation.

Smith: Can you describe the house in Alexandria?

Burba: I remember walking in the front door and there being what I would call a great room today. It was a living room, but not a formal living room. It was a family room, if you will. But there was an eating area over at the end and a fireplace on the right. Very cozy, very comfortable. Not huge in comparison to the home I lived in here, just a different style. Warm, comfortable. I never went upstairs, I don't think we went upstairs. I remember the dining room. That was formal, but then we had a formal dining room, so...A pretty backyard. But we spent most of the time in the family room, sitting and talking.

Smith: Tell me about your aunt at that point. What was she like?

Burba: Oh, golly. Gracious, very gracious. She was gracious when we visited the White House, she was always very gracious anytime, anytime that we were around her alone, or when she was with my uncle. They never forgot names. I was always impressed by that, with the hundreds and thousands of people, I never, ever saw either one of them forget names. I have to honestly say that every time I saw her I never, ever knew that she had a problem. Which was extremely surprising to me, especially spending three days at the White House. I would have thought I would have picked up on it, I was in my twenties then. I never picked up on it. I was surprised.

Smith: When her breast cancer surgery took place, and again, it's hard to convey to this generation or future generations who will see this stuff, the extent to which in those days, that was kept under wraps.

Burba: Oh, absolutely.

Smith: Treated almost as a shameful thing.

Burba: Oh, yes. She's an extremely courageous woman. And I wonder if that's what attracted her to my uncle, in hindsight. Maybe he saw that courage in her, that was exemplified later for all of us to see. I mean, she thought nothing of disagreeing with my uncle on ERA – publicly. Well, with all due respect, he has his opinions, and I also have mine. She was admired for that. I don't know about everybody, or if there is a segment that thought she should just be quiet.

Smith: Did she take any heat back here for being so outspoken on some issues that were seen as liberal?

Burba: Probably, but I'm unaware of them. But I'm sure she did. There would have to be ultraconservative groups in the early 70s, even though the country was changing, that certainly would have frowned on her stand, number one. And secondly, that she would have even expressed it.

Smith: Right.

Burba: But I wasn't cognizant of that.

Smith: The famous *Sixty Minutes* interview brought a fascinating reaction, because initially there was a ton of mail, much of it very hostile.

Burba: Oh, yes.

Smith: But in short order, the polls showed, her popularity soared.

Burba: And her comments about Susan. I watched the interview. I remember her comments about Susan.

Smith: Were you surprised about what you were seeing?

- Burba: No. No, I really wasn't. I was scared of the reaction. I thought, oh, is the country ready for this? Is the world ready for this? But, no. Again, I think of her as a very strong, courageous, forthright, truthful woman.
- Smith: And clearly, with a sense of humor.
- Burba: Oh, absolutely with a sense of humor; and a sense of grace, elegance. Truly the whole package.
- Smith: She loved clothes.
- Burba: Oh, yes.
- Smith: And looked great in whatever she wore.
- Burba: But I never put her – and I hesitate to say this – it wasn't important to her who the designer was, as it has been so important to other first ladies.
- Smith: Understood. Yeah.
- Burba: She looked good, regardless.
- Smith: But there are wonderful stories about – some of them after the White House days – some during – where she would not hesitate to sort of deflate him a little bit with humor. The story about when they were at the re-dedication of the Pantlind, and they were going on about this hotel and it was built in 1913, which was the year the president was born, and how it had gone through all of this renovation and so on. And she turns to him and said, "You could use a little renovation yourself." That sort of thing. And he laughed.
- Burba: See, yes, he shared a wonderful sense of humor. Now, I always thought he was born in 1914. Thirteen – you're right, because my second son was born on the day that he turned 70. And that was 7/14/73, so, yes. I remember. I had to stop and think for a second.
- When we would go out to Vail for the charity golf tournaments, none of us – that was their tournament – they were being very generous in having us out there, including us in things that we would not otherwise have had the

opportunity to have participated in, been exposed to. And they always made a point of making sure that all the family was invited, and some things – tickets, etc., for events were already taken care of by donors or whatever – so they were both very generous in that respect. We would never have assumed by going out there that we should go to their house, and yet, that house – I have pictures I was just looking at last night before I came down here – wonderful pictures of the house in Vail where we were all together. It was when Jim was still alive. Barb was gone, but Jim was remarried and it was just...

Smith: The house that they built in Vail?

Burba: Exactly. In Beaver Creek. Gorgeous.

Smith: Was it?

Burba: It was beautiful, absolutely beautiful. But he worked hard for it, you know?

Smith: By all accounts, they were beloved in Vail.

Burba: I'm sure that's true. I think their loyalty to that city, they embraced that city as – it was never Grand Rapids – it would never be Grand Rapids – but it was their summer home, eventually. He used to go out there and ski all the time, but obviously as his health became an issue...

Smith: It's so funny, you talk about the work ethic, and of course, they all worked on Saturdays, because for the old Congressman the day was defined by answering the mail. And in Vail, he would walk to the post office.

Burba: Oh, I could see him doing that. Absolutely.

Smith: If he didn't have the mail, he was reading the six newspapers every morning. It's funny, after 9/11 and the anthrax scare, the postal service stopped making Saturday deliveries and no one could make him understand why they didn't have mail on Saturday. So they actually had members of the staff who put on these spaceman outfits, literally, and went through the mail.

Burba: Oh, that's hysterical.

Smith: Isn't that something?

Burba: I had no idea about that.

Smith: And that's obviously very late in life.

Burba: Yes, exactly.

Smith: But that's an almost ferocious work ethic.

Burba: I just thought of another story and it was when we were at the White House, but it had followed – no – it was preceding, I believe... I can't remember if it preceded or followed the assassination attempts, or it could have been another visit. But I do remember standing in the Oval Office with him, and being so surprised at the thickness of the glass in the Oval Office. Because you'd need an armored tank and five thousand other pieces of equipment before you'd even get to the front door, and to stand there in that Oval Office and see that thickness, and I can remember remarking on it, "Why is this glass so thick?" Because it just seemed like this is part of the house and nobody is going to get up here. And I think this was preceding the assassination attempts, he made the comment, "You know, I don't know why they have this, because if somebody really wants to get you, they will. And there's nothing anybody can do about it."

Smith: Of course, he'd been on the Warren Commission.

Burba: His feeling was, that the Secret Service does a wonderful job, he thought so highly of them...

Smith: They seemed to have a very special relationship.

Burba: Oh, he really did. He absolutely did. And I can also remember the staff at the White House when we were visiting. We were sitting in the solarium, my husband and I, which was called the solarium at the time. I don't know what it is called now – this big room that was decorated in yellow.

Smith: Mrs. Coolidge called it her sky parlor.

Burba: Beautiful view. And somebody came in and asked us if we wanted something to drink. I said, "Oh, yeah. I'd love a Coke," and I don't remember what my husband said. The next thing we know, somebody came up and they had this elaborate silver tray and the Coke and the flower. Both of us were so embarrassed, we just wanted to shrink into a chair. Well, when we got done, we took the tray back to the kitchen and the people downstairs said, "Ah! You don't have to do that." And I just looked at them and said, "You know, I am so embarrassed that you brought this to us. We're perfectly capable of coming down. If you tell us where – we'll just go get." "Oh, well..."

And see, I think that was the relationship – they didn't think of them as staff. They didn't think of the Secret Service, my impression is, they didn't think of the Secret Service – it was an extended part of their family.

Smith: Unlike some other presidents who shall remain nameless... at Christmas time, they made absolutely certain not to have events going on, so the agents could spend...

Burba: Could be with their families.

Smith: Exactly.

Burba: It goes right back to their roots, goes back to family, and I think that truly was the most important thing.

Smith: Can you describe, briefly, the dynamic with the four brothers?

Burba: Oh, golly. I think all three brothers, idolized their older brother. But there was eleven years difference between my father and my Uncle Jerry. There had to have been close to sixteen or fifteen years difference between my Uncle Jim and my Uncle Jerry. And I don't know about my Uncle Tom – maybe six, but I'm guessing. So their growing up years, by the time they were growing up, certainly my father and my Uncle Jim grew up in a house directly across the street from where I live. That's where they grew up. Jerry was already at law school, he might have even been in the Navy at that time. So he was only coming home – quick visits coming home. So as far as growing up, I don't

know. I know that they were a close family, and I know that they idolized their older brother. But there was a real sense – as I got older and long after Jerry left the White House – I had a real sense that each one of those brothers respected the profession that each of them had chosen. And it wouldn't occur to any of them to question the other's decisions relating to their business or chosen field.

Smith: Mrs. Eisenhower was asked a perfectly understandable question – you must be very proud of your son – and she said, “Which one? All of my sons I'm proud of.”

Burba: I really think there certainly would be a *little* bit more sense of pride if your son managed to be president of the United States, but I think that would have been a comment made by both my grandparents. There was no separation there. I don't think Jerry was ever treated differently – ever.

Smith: Was it Tom who went into politics?

Burba: For a short time. I believe he was a lobbyist in Lansing. My world was, what's happening this weekend, where's the dance? That kind of thing. But certainly I recall him being in Lansing, as a lobbyist, I remember when he was defeated when he ran again for something, but I couldn't tell you what it was.

Smith: And then what was his career path?

Burba: After that, I don't know what my Uncle Tom did because they moved soon after that, from EGR and they moved to South Carolina – an island – I'm trying to think of the name of it and I can't now. And I think he was retired, basically. I think he still did, I believe I'm correct, that he still did reserve duty with the Navy, to some extent. But then he retired.

Smith: And your Uncle Jim?

Burba: Well, Uncle Jim was the optometrist, and he really worked until the Parkinson's didn't allow him to work anymore. But certainly that was what he did. And I think about this, when Jerry was running, it's interesting because Jerry asked all three of his brothers to campaign for him, and they'd always

remained in the background. When the whole thing was going on with Nixon, ...no comment, no comment, no comment...I can remember phone calls coming into the house from reporters offering my father money and he turned it down. And I remember the amount, and I remember thinking, "Are you crazy?" Because it was a lot of money back then. Absolutely no comment. Just nothing.

Smith: What were they after?

Burba: Any information. Any stories, anything. Back then they were relentless. When Jerry was president, my dad used to have to fly a lot for business, and he, at that time, you could do this, he would fly under an assumed name.

Smith: Really?

Burba: Yes, because he didn't want anybody making the connection. He didn't want to be asked, and yet when Jerry ran for the office, he asked every single one of his brothers to campaign for him – outside this state – to go to other states, individually, and with him. And they all – they did it in a second. So that showed me, or illustrates to me how much respect they had for him, how much they believed in him, and how much they wanted him to win.

Smith: Were they at the convention?

Burba: My father was at Kansas City – that was '76. My mother and dad, Barb and Jim, I believe they all were there. I'm not sure – I think maybe Barb was still alive then, so I think they were all there.

Smith: Was there resentment, locally, over their decision to move to California?

Burba: Well, again, none that I would hear. Was it said behind our backs? Perhaps, probably. I certainly didn't blame him, for health reasons. For his health, for her health, anymore than I blame my father for leaving for six months. As he said, "I didn't work for sixty years to spend another miserable winter in Michigan." And they are miserable, and they've always been miserable. They are just getting longer. So, I'm sure there were some people, but nobody would ever say that to me, directly.

Smith: He certainly came back often.

Burba: This was his home.

Smith: Yeah.

Burba: Truly.

Smith: And putting this place here - obviously your dad had a huge role in the creation of this institution.

Burba: Yeah, he turned to my dad a lot during that time, as far as ideas. I have correspondence that Dad's given me. It was when Jordan Shepherd was very involved in designing and before the ground was even broken. Jerry was busy, and so if there were things that needed taken care of here, he would ask Dad. To me, there would have been greater resentment had this not been here. No question. But I don't think it ever would have occurred to him for it to be anywhere else. Again, I just go back to - I'm being repetitive, but it's nothing you probably haven't heard before - his roots went so deep to this city and to the people. I think it was also to his parents. I just don't think it ever occurred to him to have it anywhere else.

Smith: Remember, on election morning, '76, when they dedicated that mural out at the airport, clearly it was the memory of his parents that caused him to choke up.

Burba: Absolutely. I have one of those in my dining room, and because the picture of the four brothers with the pony - I have that as a photo. So the first time I saw that in that mural was - wow. And then, selfishly, I thought, someday my children, my grandchildren, are going to come through this airport and they're not only going to see their grandfather, they are going to see their grandfather's brother. It was surreal.

Smith: When he came back, I understand if there was time, he would get together with the family.

Burba: Absolutely. He and dad would go play golf at Kent. Often times it was usually an in and out trip. A day and a night and then gone. But we'd have dinner together when he came in, even in the later years, and there was always one of the kids traveling with him when he would come. That was the one condition that Betty had set up. It was after Philadelphia – if you are going to be traveling now, one of the kids is going to go with you. We would still see them. We would see them for dinner and it was great – it was wonderful. I appreciated the fact that we would do that because a lot of those trips earlier on, every single minute of his day was spoken for. You didn't want to intrude, so if something was arranged, it was because he wanted it. Again, it was at his request, then we were all grateful.

Smith: It must have been very special – the ninetieth birthday celebration.

Burba: Oh yes. That was very, very emotional.

Smith: Did you have a sense that this might be his last trip back?

Burba: Oh, absolutely, health-wise. Primarily because the family, my father, we were privy to more information that Jerry and Betty's children were sharing with my dad, than anybody else. Maybe some close people later on, but I knew the Thanksgiving before he died. That Thanksgiving I can remember my cousin calling my father down in Florida and saying, "You know, Uncle Dick, I don't think he's going to make it until Christmas, and I want you to be able to talk to him." So, when he was here for his ninetieth, his health was starting to fail a little, I didn't think he'd be back for his ninety-fifth, which is what he talked about.

Smith: Did he?

Burba: Yeah. I really didn't think so. But, having said that, ninety was good.

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

Burba: It had to have been – he died December 26 – I want to say probably, I'd have to go back and look on my calendars – if not the preceding summer, the summer before that, when he came into town. Whenever the last time was he

came into town, was when I saw him. Because when he came into town for museum business or something, to meet with Marty, to see Dad, and then we would have dinner out at Kent. In fact, definitely that was the last time.

Smith: Do you wonder if he ever – I know that she did at one point say to Marty...she wanted to see where they were going to be buried. She said, “I want to see where people are going to dance on my grave.” But you wonder whether he ever walked out there.

Burba: If I had to guess, I’d say yes. A guess, purely a guess. Yes, I think his eye for detail – okay I just want to make sure that this is all taken care of – it looks good – and that would have been enough.

Smith: It’s such a beautiful spot.

Burba: It’s gorgeous.

Smith: It’s interesting – you may have heard this. When Presidents Clinton and Bush ’43 came by, each had the same reaction, which was: this is Jerry Ford. Calm in the middle of the city.

Burba: Absolutely. It’s extraordinary. I’ve been down there many times. Even during the winter time, I’ll drive down because it’s so close. And that’s the only place I go. I don’t necessarily come in here, into the museum, but I’ll go there. It’s almost – I’m here, they’re not – my cousins are not. So if it is a special time, I feel like it is something I can do. Nobody knows who I am when I’m down there.

Smith: Do you remember how you learned of his death?

Burba: Oh, yes, very distinctly. I was in Atlanta, at our son’s house for Christmas and my husband drove down, and I flew down. My husband left, early, early, early, like 3:00 a.m. on December 26th to drive back. I slept in because I wasn’t leaving until the 27th. I came out of the bedroom and I have two little granddaughters - at that time, four and two, three and one? I can’t remember. But I came out of the bedroom and they had all of these gates up. Adults had to go over the gates. But I noticed right away that the TV was on, and my son

never had that particular TV on. This was eight o'clock in the morning. I came around the corner and I didn't look at it, I just saw that it was on, but the girls were right there, so there was my attention. And he said, "Mom," and I said, "Yes?" And he said, "There was a message on my cell phone last night from Grandma." He said, "Uncle Jerry died this morning."

I was not surprised, but I just felt such a sense of loss. It was just staggering and I couldn't really wrap my head around it at the time, and I didn't want the girls to see my cry. So I turned to my son and I said, "I'm just going into the bedroom for a minute. Just tell the girls I have to wash my hands or something." And as I went to put my leg over gate, and they have hardwood floors, I wasn't paying close enough attention, and I fell and broke the bone in my arm. And so, at the funeral, nobody could see that I had my arm in a sling, I had a big black furry thing strung over it because I didn't want anybody to ask and I didn't want to draw attention to it, and it was a hairline fracture.

But flying home the next day was not easy because Scott said, "Mom, do you want to go to the hospital here?" I said, "No, I can't do that. I've just got to get ready, my flight leaves tomorrow." He said, "Well, do you want to go home now?" I said, "Nothing that I can do now," but then I started checking my cell phone and there were things that I had to do here, working with Chip Emery, as soon as I got back.

Smith: Were you surprised by the reaction, local and beyond?

Burba: The numbers were staggering to me. And the calmness, the quiet, the orderliness without being told. I expected this city to show its respects, but when people who were interviewed who had driven from out east, or from Ohio, I was stunned. Absolutely stunned. And I thought what comfort to the family - my aunt and my cousins.

Smith: I was with ABC early in the week and we'd been told don't be surprised if you see Mrs. Ford in a wheelchair. And, of course, we never did until the very end, and even then, she insisted on walking all that way and later on someone

remarked on that to her. And she said, “Well, that’s what my husband would have wanted.”

Burba: I worried about my father, too, because it was very difficult for him because he had just had surgery at Thanksgiving. And the cane, and standing out in that cold, cold air – and yet the day of the funeral here in Grand Rapids, in January, to have those temperatures and no snow – somebody was talking to somebody, because there could have been accidents and cars ending up in snow drifts and older people slipping on steps. It would have been a nightmare traffic-wise. Truly, I don’t remember a day in January before or since, where we haven’t been knee high to a tall Indian in snow.

Smith: Perfect.

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