

**Gerald R. Ford Oral History Project**  
**Peter Cook**  
**Interviewed by**  
**Richard Norton Smith**  
**August 8, 2008**

Smith: Peter, first of all, let me ask you, did you live in Grand Rapids all your life?

Cook: Yes, born and raised in Grand Rapids - south end of town. Born on Shamrock Street and raised on London Street.

Smith: It presumably has changed a great deal in 94 years.

Cook: Well, you know where those two streets are. They're both one block long dead end streets between Clyde Park and Century, down by the old Kelvinator plant that doesn't exist anymore.

Smith: We'd love to try to get a sense of what Grand Rapids looked like, felt like, when Gerald Ford was a boy, say in the 1920s-1930s, before the Depression, during the Depression. Talk about what the town was like in those days.

Cook: I can remember this. The southwest side of town where I lived, down where London and Lynch Street and Crofton, Hogan, all that, by the old Kelvinator plant – they were all Dutch. On the other side of the river were the Polish. But it was all Dutch down there. In fact it was so Dutch there was a church there, and they would have a Dutch service at nine o'clock and then an English service at ten o'clock.

Smith: Really? So when you say it was all Dutch, there were people down there who spoke Dutch routinely?

Cook: Oh, yeah. They spoke some English, too, but you'd have some of the older people – we kids – when the older people didn't want us to hear what they were talking about, they'd talk in Dutch.

Smith: English was a second language – that's interesting. What was the economy – was it basically all furniture? Was furniture the mainstay of the local economy?

Cook: And all of that goes way back and I think – and of course, Grand Rapids was the furniture capital of the world. Remember that? That was before your time. We had a lot of old trees in Michigan, the wood and everything. All these different furniture plants – we were the furniture capital of the world – remember that – Grand Rapids.

I remember South – there were three major schools – well, four major schools. There was South High School, Union, Central and Catholic Central.

Smith: Now tell me, because over the years I got the impression that there was a bit of a rivalry particularly between Central and South.

Cook: Oh, South and Union. Big rivalry. Every Thanksgiving Day they'd have a football game on Island Park, which is in the middle of the river – Grand River down there. It's gone now, but there was a little ball park down there in the middle of the river – Island Park. Every Thanksgiving Day South and Union would play – it was always for the city championship and sometimes for the state championship.

Smith: So I take it from that, that being a football player was a big deal in Grand Rapids.

Cook: Oh, yeah, sure.

Smith: What school did you go to?

Cook: South High School – with Jerry Ford. He was the Class of '31 and I was the Class of '32.

Smith: Because we've been told over the years, his parents in particular wanted him to go to South High because they thought it was a much more diverse range of people that he would be exposed to. That Central High was a little bit more upper crust.

Cook: Upper crust – I'd say upper crust. That's a good term. Upper crust.

Smith: And tell me about South High. What was it like, what was the student body like? Was it, in fact, very diverse?

Cook: You know, I can remember this. There were only three African-Americans. Siki McGee was a black guy – he played football and everything; then there was a female, I can't remember her name. She was a four-star student. There were three black people in South High School – three black kids.

My folks had five boys in a two bedroom bungalow. Before I went to South High School there was a football player at South that got hit and got paralyzed, and my dad said to us kids, "You kids can't play football, you've got to play instruments. Play in the band." So I played trumpet, Art played clarinet, trombone, baritone, flute, and piccolo. We had a Cook orchestra. When we started dating, all my dad wanted to know – does she play piano? The girl we were dating - he needed a piano player.

Smith: Did you know Jerry's parents at all?

Cook: No. See Jerry had two sets of parents and...

Smith: There was Dorothy and Gerald Ford, Sr. here in Grand Rapids, whom he always regarded as his dad.

Cook: I knew his brother Dick. Dick Ford. But I didn't know his parents. I remember visiting Jerry several times in Washington. I'll tell you a little story. I belong to this DOCA organization and we'd have our annual meetings in Washington. And so my wife and I invited Jerry and Betty to come to our dinner in Washington. Well, he said, "Peter, I can't because I have to speak Saturday morning at Cedar Springs." Back then we had a corporate airplane. I said, "Well, Jerry, you come and after dinner we'll fly back to Grand Rapids, so you can be at Cedar Springs." He said, okay. He came, but he said, "Betty can't come because our dog is sick and she has to take care of the dog." After, we found, she was drunk. This was when she started to be on alcohol. But he didn't tell us that. We found that out afterwards.

That's a little story in the background, anyhow.

Smith: Did you know her from your early days in Grand Rapids? Or was it much later?

Cook: Only after they got married, when they were in Washington. I danced with her several times in Washington.

Smith: Did you? She was a good dancer.

Cook: Good dancer, real good dancer. I was not a good dancer, but all I had to do was hold her hand.

Smith: Tell me again, South High – he was a football player. Was he kind of a big man on campus?

Cook: He was because he played center on the football team. In South and Union, I think that year we were state championship football team.

Smith: Was he a popular guy?

Cook: Yeah, he was. He never felt he was popular, but he was popular. Everyone liked him.

Smith: Tell me about the Depression in Grand Rapids. How did it make itself felt?

Cook: Oh, boy. I remember that for sure, you know. What that was, you had the little chips that you could buy bread and milk with?

Smith: Like scrip?

Cook: Like scrip or something. Because my folks were poor and so you'd get so many scrips and you could go to the grocery store and get bread and milk with it. That was in the Depression, oh boy.

Smith: What did people do? How did they get through it?

Cook: I don't think a lot of them did. I remember as a kid going downtown in the night and there were a lot of guys sleeping under the bridges and stuff by the river. Only did that a couple of times. My folks took me down to see that.

Smith: Now, he put himself through college.

Cook: Who?

Smith: Jerry.

Cook: Oh, yeah.

Smith: And he sold his blood along the way. Got a scholarship. But it was tough.

Cook: Yeah.

Smith: What did you do after high school?

Cook: I got a job at the Kelvinator plant. I remember, seventeen cents an hour and then the minimum wage of thirty-five cents an hour came in.

Smith: That was a New Deal measure?

Cook: Right. New Deal, yup.

Smith: So you doubled your income.

Cook: Doubled my income. But, here's the good thing, there was a guy in charge of the paint mix room. There were three coats of paint on those refrigerators: primer, intermediate and finish coat. He was in charge of the big tanks – the chemist. After the whistle would blow, the spray gunners would drop their guns and head out. He had to come out with a bucket of paint thinner and clean the paint out of those spray guns. I'd stay and help him. I wouldn't get paid for it, but I'd stay and help him for fifteen or twenty minutes. One day he came to me and said, "Peter, they are putting on a night shift. I'm recommending you be in charge of the paint mix room." Oh, boy. He said, "You'll go from thirty-five cents an hour to a dollar and a quarter an hour." Oh, jeez, great, I did.

Smith: You must have felt like a rich man.

Cook: I did! Then I decided I didn't want to work at Kelvinator all my life so I went downtown to Davenport and started going to Davenport during the day.

Smith: Let me ask you before I leave this: downtown, were there movie theaters in the '30s?

Cook: Oh, there was the Majestic, I remember the Majestic, the Regent, yeah. There were two I remember, I think there were three.

Smith: Where were the places that high school kids hung out? There must have been restaurants or theaters or places where your classmates would congregate after school.

Cook: There was Houseman Field, Central High School Houseman Field there, and a lot of times there would be events there. And then there was – I can't remember – South High had a park about three blocks from South High School, too. There was a big park there with a stadium. And then, you guys don't remember this, Island Park in Grand River. That was great. Right in the middle of Grand River – there was a park out there. It was small, but there was a football field.

Smith: And the movie theaters – did you go to the movies?

Cook: The Majestic and the Regent, I remember when, way back, of course this recently when Jack Loeks started the theater downtown – what's the name of that? The what?

Nelson: [inaudible]

Cook: That's still downtown, but...

Smith: Tell me about Frank McKay. He ran this town, didn't he?

Cook: He ran the state.

Smith: He ran the state?

Cook: Oh, yeah. And of course, I knew him as a kid, I knew who he was. He was the governor, wasn't he?

Smith: Well, no, he was the political boss here in Grand Rapids.

Cook: That's right. Yeah. I remember my dad was a mechanic for a road contractor, and Claude Loomis said I've got to buy, I forget the brand of tires, because Frank McKay owns that tire company. And if you don't buy those tires for trucks, you'll never get a state job.

Smith: That's power.

Cook: Yeah, that's power.

Smith: Where did this power come from? Do you know? What made him able to dictate to people like that?

Cook: I don't know. I was a kid.

Smith: Yeah. I take it Grand Rapids was a very Republican town in those days?

Cook: Yeah, it was.

Smith: And he was the boss, I mean the political boss.

Cook: Yeah.

Smith: When Ford came back after the war and decided to run for Congress, do you remember Bartel Jonkman, the guy he ran against? The Congressman he ran against?

Cook: I do remember that name. Yes I do, because I supported Jerry Ford.

Smith: Can you describe Jonkman?

Cook: No. I know the name, I remember the name.

Smith: He was an isolationist, and Ford was an internationalist. How much of that, because we've been talking to other people, how much of that was a generational fight? All these young vets who just came back from the war, sort of taking on the old guard, the MacKay machine. That sounds like what was going on.

Cook: Do you remember – you know John McCain?

Smith: Right.

Cook: Admiral McCain – do you know Admiral McCain?

Smith: No.

Cook: Yeah. Well I belonged to DOCA group - Defense Orientation Conference Association. They were a group of civilians who supported our military. Way back then a lot of the civilians didn't want to support our military, but this

DOCA group did. Admiral McCain talked to us. This was when his son John McCain was a prisoner in Vietnam. Vietnam was it?

Smith: Yeah.

Cook: Never forget him talking to us about that. He was telling us what the Vietnamese people, if he would do a lot of favors, they would release his son. He said, "I can't do any of that stuff." He never did. Finally, they did release his son.

Smith: Yeah. Why did you support Jerry Ford when he first ran for Congress?

Cook: Well, I knew him. I went to South High School with him. He was Class of '31, I was Class of '32. Oh, I knew Jerry Ford.

Smith: What did you like about him?

Cook: I just liked him. Then of course he became our Congressman.

Smith: And what kind of Congressman – he was back here a lot as a Congressman, wasn't he?

Cook: Oh, yeah. Right, yup he was. A good Congressman.

Smith: Good constituent service?

Cook: Then he became vice president, president. Yeah.

Smith: Right.

Cook: Nixon. Was it Nixon? Yeah, then he became president. I'd go to Washington several times and visit Jerry Ford.

Smith: When he was in Congress, did you ever go lobby him for something – for Grand Rapids?

Cook: No. I remember he pardoned Nixon, remember that?

Smith: How unpopular was that, even out here?

Cook: To me it wasn't unpopular because I supported Nixon, but then it made Jerry Ford unpopular with the media people. Yeah.

- Smith: You do you remember arguments at the time?
- Cook: I remember a lot of arguments, I can't remember how they go on, but yeah. They accused Jerry of pardoning the bad guy or something like that. I don't know what they were talking about.
- Smith: And there were people who thought there was a deal.
- Cook: Yeah, well, it wasn't Nixon, what was the name of the guy that he supported – Agnew?
- Smith: His vice president was Agnew.
- Cook: That's vice president.
- Smith: Who Ford replaced.
- Cook: That's right, Agnew.
- Smith: How was it decided that this museum would be in Grand Rapids? What was the process whereby it came to be here? The library was going to be in Ann Arbor, and were there people here in Grand Rapids who were campaigning to have the museum?
- Cook: I remember – I felt that the library ought to be in Grand Rapids, too, instead of Ann Arbor, but then they talked about this museum. I can't remember the details, but I've been a supporter, of course, for a long time.
- Smith: What was on this site before the museum? What did this neighborhood look like back then?
- Cook: Jeez. I can remember land, but there were some old stores, I think there were some stores along here, too.
- Smith: And downtown – this and the hotel, and the new art museum, really began the renewal of downtown?
- Cook: The restoration or whatever it was downtown. Yeah.
- Smith: What was downtown like before that?

- Cook: Of course, as a kid, it was just small. I remember the streetcars downtown. Streetcars would run down Grandville Avenue, over to Warner Park.
- Smith: And was anything open on a Sunday?
- Cook: Hardly anything. Oh, no. That's right. Everything was closed.
- Smith: Was that the Dutch influence?
- Cook: I think it was mostly the Dutch people, oh, yeah.
- Smith: For people who don't know, when they hear Dutch, what does that mean? What impact did they have? What was their outlook? They are fiscally conservative, presumably. Pretty traditional in a lot of ways? What does it mean?
- Cook: To be Dutch?
- Smith: Yeah, to be Dutch in West Michigan?
- Cook: I remember the Dutch came over and they settled in New York and Michigan and Iowa. I remember in Holland.
- Smith: Conservative?
- Cook: Very conservative, yeah. Very conservative. In Grand Rapids, remember, the Dutch were on this side of the river and the Italians were on the other side of the river. The west side were Italians, the south side were the Dutch.
- Smith: Was there a black population in Grand Rapids, to speak of?
- Cook: Very few. In Grand Rapids, in South High School there were three blacks. Siki McGee was a ball player, then there was a gal, and she was a real sharp gal. And then there was another gal, I can't remember her (inaudible). But Siki McGee and there was another guy...
- Smith: And did he play football with Jerry Ford?
- Cook: Oh, yeah. Yeah.
- Smith: You saw Ford at the White House?

Cook: Oh, yeah, several times.

Smith: Did you go to a state dinner, or what kind of things would you...?

Cook: Oh, a state dinner up in his office? We were both from South High School, and I told you, when we invited he and Betty. Did I tell you that?

Smith: She has really made a lot of history in her own right though, hasn't she?

Cook: Oh, afterwards, sure.

Smith: With what she has done in terms of the Betty Ford Center.

Cook: Yeah, with the Betty Ford, uh...

Smith: Center.

Cook: Center. Yeah. I guess you go through stages in your life, she went through one stage, but then afterwards she really, she did a lot of good.

Smith: When they left the White House and did not come back to Grand Rapids, did that cause a lot of comment?

Cook: Comment, I don't remember. I remember, though, I went twice – I flew to California – what was the place in California?

Smith: Rancho Mirage.

Cook: Yeah, Rancho Mirage.

Smith: Right near Palm Springs.

Cook: Near Palm Springs, yeah. I visited him out there, twice. I remember the last time he was getting pretty weak. I remember he stood up, he had a – somebody sort of had to help him stand up. He talked to us holding on to the table with his hand. Everybody knew he was in pretty ill – or whatever.

Smith: That wasn't too long before...

Cook: He couldn't walk. I remember when they took him over to the other side of the room, they had two guys took him by the arms and took him over to the other side of the room to talk or something like that.

- Smith: What do you remember of the funeral? Were you surprised at the local response? The numbers...?
- Cook: Surprised? No, he was so well known...I remember, was it the funeral or something where all the highways were closed, I mean the people standing on the highways and roads – was that the funeral?
- Smith: Yes. And the long lines.
- Cook: Oh, long lines, yeah.
- Smith: How do you think he should be remembered? What about Jerry Ford, besides the offices he held, what about him as a person?
- Cook: As a person? He was a great person. He was willing to help people, and he got the high office and everything, but he never became an imperialistic guy, no. He was always, ordinary isn't the right word, but he was always an ordinary guy. Normal guy.
- Smith: Accessible.
- Cook: Yup.
- Smith: Do you miss the old days, the old Grand Rapids, is this better than it was? Or just different?
- Cook: In some ways it may be better, I don't know. I miss the old days.
- Smith: What do you miss about the old days?
- Cook: I guess I miss the people. Just the people. The economy, of course, it used to be the furniture capital of the world, remember that? People would come from all around the United States to these furniture shows and all these, it wasn't furniture companies we had, and then I guess we ran out of woods in Michigan pretty soon. So, the stuff moved down to the Carolinas. Remember – you're too young – we were the furniture capital of the world, Grand Rapids. The furniture capital of the world. I can't remember the names of the furniture companies.
- Unknown: In 1985 President Ford came to the opening of your business.

Smith: Oh really?

Cook: Yup, he did.

Smith: 1985? How did you start your business?

Cook: How did I start my business?

Smith: Mazda – you were ahead of the curve. You were selling small cars before anyone knew they wanted small cars.

Cook: That goes way back. Way back. Started with Volkswagen and Porsche-Audi for twenty-five years, and then in '77 the Japanese cars started coming to market – Mazda – so they came to me, and I became the only independently-owned Mazda distributor in the United States. I had Mazda Great Lakes. They gave me the five Great Lakes states. So I set up all the Mazda dealers in the five Great Lakes states. Michigan, Indiana, Illinois, Ohio and Wisconsin.

Smith: And today you look at what's happening to Ford and General Motors, it's the small car that everyone wants to buy.

Cook: I know. But to me it's something – I can remember I knew way back in the Volkswagen days, we had about a year's wait for that little Volkswagen Bug. And I knew a guy who worked at General Motors, I said, "Why doesn't General Motors make a little car like that?" I forget what he said, but it was something like, "Well, they'll never sell more than two percent of the cars in this country, so we'll never do that little thing – make that little thing."

Smith: Well, I suppose when gasoline was fifteen cents a gallon, that attitude was understandable.

Cook: Well, I suppose so.

Smith: But when it's four dollars a gallon...

Cook: Yeah, but that little car with the air-cooled engine in the back...

Smith: Did you sell many cars in the beginning? I mean, Volkswagens and the like – were you a success from the beginning?

- Cook: Oh, sure. I can remember we had a year's wait list for those cars. I remember one year's wait list. We got to set up dealers, and then the Allies bombed the plant out in Wolfsburg, Germany during the war. And after the war, remember, all those German soldiers needed work, so the Allies rebuilt the plant in Wolfsburg so the German guys had something to do. Dr. Porsche was the guy that designed the little Volkswagen. It was the one good thing Hitler did. He said, "Dr. Porsche, we need a small car, a people's car," he said. That's why Dr. Porsche designed this little Volkswagen and they made it in Wolfsburg.
- Smith: I wonder how much of that success had to do with Dutch thrift? If the Dutch in West Michigan are as thrifty as I think they are, they would appreciate a small car because it's a lot cheaper to drive than a big one.
- Cook: I can't remember, but remember, we had a year's wait list for that little Volkswagen. A year's wait list. The Allies had bombed the plant out over there...
- Smith: And I think history repeats itself. I think there still a year's wait list for small cars. Was there anything we haven't covered? Anything about Jerry Ford?
- Cook: Jerry Ford – yeah, of course, I remember him a couple of times in Washington, remember he was a football coach for – when Davenport started that University of Grand Rapids, or something like that? Jerry Ford was a coach there for a couple of years. After the war, all the soldiers come back from the war and they all had scrips or something to go to college, see? So Davenport started this university and had Jerry Ford as their coach out there. Then the scrips ran out.
- Smith: Did you know Phil Buchen?
- Cook: Oh, sure.
- Smith: What was he like?
- Cook: Phil Buchen?
- Smith: They were law partners together, weren't they?

Cook: Yeah – I'm trying to think. Yeah, they were law partners. Phil Buchen. Yeah.

Smith: Along with a man named Julius Amberg, I believe.

Cook: I remember that name, too. But I remember Phil Buchen. I used to see him quite a bit, way back. Phil Buchen. Yeah. I think I've outlived most of those guys.

Smith: Well, it's not a complaint – maybe it's a lament.

Unknown: There is one story you tell. He's supposed to not say about Betty, he was supposed to tell...

Cook: About what?

Unknown: Your story that we've told you many times – the story is supposed to be that President Ford came in and one man met him at the airport, and then a few weeks later Air Force One came in and the streets were all blocked off. That was your story about taking him on your plane that you really wanted to tell, Peter. You got off on the Betty tangent rather than telling about how only one man was at the airport.

Smith: This would be before the vice presidency?

Cook: The title – it's the same guy, only one guy meeting him at the airport, now he's got a title, now the whole place is jammed. You get a title and, yeah. I said, he's the same guy.

Smith: Now, walk me through that. You met him at the airport? This was before the vice presidency or...?

Cook: Oh I knew him in South High School.

Smith: Okay, but when he came to town, and you said one person met him at the airport – was that when he was still a Congressman?

Cook: Yeah. I flew him to town, didn't I, from Washington?

Unknown: Well, this was the story with the Red Flannel Days.

Cook: Yeah, that's right.

- Smith: But you flew him – he was coming home for the Red Flannel Days...
- Cook: Yeah, he had a speech. There was only one guy at the airport to meet him. Was it a month later and he's vice president or something? And he had to speak at Calvin College – yeah, that's right. He was to speak at Calvin College. My gosh, there was a thousand people out there to meet him, now because he's vice president. Same guy, but different title.
- Smith: But you know, it's the same guy – that's the key. Because he didn't change.
- Cook: He didn't change at all, no. He was always the same. When he was president I would visit him in Washington. He was always the same guy.
- Smith: That's the key. He didn't change.
- Cook: No. He had a lot different responsibilities and everything.
- Smith: That's what we want. Thank you.
- Unknown: I didn't know if you wanted him to elaborate on when he came – you asked him to come to your grand opening at their new company and he came with the head officials of Japan – you had a party at the Amway Grand.
- Cook: Oh yeah.
- Smith: He came back a lot, as a former president. He came back to Grand Rapids quite a bit.
- Cook: He did. This is sort of his home town, really – his home town. Grand Rapids.
- Unknown: The President called him on his birthday.
- Smith: You'd get a birthday call?
- Cook: Yeah. I don't know if he knew, but his secretary knew.
- Smith: But he was the one on the phone.
- Cook: Yeah. Sure. I remember the last time I visited him in Santa Barbara, was it? Santa Barbara, California?
- Smith: Oh, Palm Springs?

Cook: Palm Springs. He was getting very weak, like I told you. They had to help him up.

Smith: Was that toward the end of his life?

Cook: Toward the end of his life. Maybe about a year before he passed away.

Smith: I think he was very frustrated once he could no longer travel. That was a real source of pleasure for him, including coming back here. I think the last time he came back here was his ninetieth birthday, and they had the big crowd outside the museum.

Cook: I think so. We were there. Yeah. Well, life is great. Wait until you young people get to your nineties and all.

Smith: I was going to say, I should live so long, but, thank you.

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