Smith: What I’d love to do for just a few minutes is get a picture, kind of a local color of what this community, what this area was like when you and Jerry Ford and veterans came back from World War II. What the political climate was. And tell me about Frank McKay. Who was Frank McKay?

Hauenstein: Frank McKay, of course, was a political person who headed up the Republican Party. He had a tremendous influence – he had an organization that was more than just a political party. It seemed that it was a question whether or not it was more political than it was off limits, so to speak.

Smith: Peter Cook was talking about this. A couple of other folks as well, that suggested that if you wanted to do business in this town or this area, you needed to have Frank McKay’s imprimatur.

Hauenstein: Frank McKay had his tentacles all through the state, not only Grand Rapids, but everywhere. He was an extremely powerful man. I might say that he probably was a quasi-organized crime type of organization.

Smith: What was the source of his power?

Hauenstein: The individual. He was the head man who ran everything. He was a hardnosed man and, of course, I think that probably people had rumored, and it was known in the press at times, that charges against him, even for murder cases, were brought about, as you probably have known or read about. But he always got out of things very nicely.

Tape shut off

Smith: You mentioned Arthur Vandenberg. For generations who don’t know anything about him, tell us about Arthur Vandenberg. Who was he, and why was he significant, here and later in the Ford story? What was his significance in Michigan and ultimately the Jerry Ford story?
Hauenstein: Arthur Vandenberg was purely a man who brought himself up virtually by his bootstraps. He was a newspaperman. He became, as a very young man, I remember my city desk – he had engraved his name one time – had been city editor of that newspaper. As had Frank Knox, incidentally, of the Chicago Daily News. Having become editor he really recognized the power of the press and became a hardworking Republican. As you know, he was ultimately appointed to the U.S. Senate and was a great speaker. He was a dynamic type of guy, but he was highly conceited. I remember even as a reporter some years before, he had called the editor of the paper and said, “I’ve got a story, send one of your reporters down.” I went down to his office. Boy, here I go, I’ve got a real one – got a good story this time. So I went down to get the story from him and he had it all typed up. He said, “Here, no changes necessary.” This was the type of man Vandenberg was.

Smith: He was an isolationist in his politics.

Hauenstein: He was pro-American – 100%. But ultimately, after the war, he did become an internationalist. There is no question about that. I remember one time he made a remark after the war that if we didn’t do something pretty soon with Russia - get it solved - we were going to go to war against Russia. He felt that that was a great possibility. I heard him say so. Obviously it didn’t come about.

Smith: What was his relationship to the McKay organization?

Hauenstein: They were friends. We never knew how close, but they were friends and they knew each other and they did communicate. There was no economic link, you might say, or a link above and beyond the possible political link.

Smith: When Ford comes home from the war, he also has undergone this conversion.

Hauenstein: Yes. Jerry came home – do we use the term President Ford rather than Jerry?

Smith: Whatever.

Hauenstein: We called him Jerry. He came home and he went into the law office, but we have to go back to the fact that we had a congressman by the name of Barney Jonkman, and in 1940 Barney really led in the House of Representatives a bill
to defeat what was then known as the Selective Service law. We had had a
one year induction, similar to a draft, induction of young men into the service
for one year only. The renewal of that law was absolutely essential to the
survival of this country from the military point of view and anyone who was
in the service knew about it because it was chaotic. We needed that renewed.
The man that led the fight against it was Barney Jonkman. He was not going
to have this renewed. He was going to allow the OHIO, Over the Hill in
October, to take over.

So those of us who came back from the service, I was in the service at the
time, but those who were not in the service were cognizant of it certainly. And
we decided that Barney Jonkman, who was proclaiming himself to be a great
hero and savior of the world - we were going to put him down where he
belonged. There was a man, he had been a former judge here, but he was also
a retired adjutant general colonel out of the service…and we organized the
Army-Navy officers, and we had some meetings and we decided we were
going to get this guy, Jonkman, out of office. We had very, very well
organized men who went out and made speeches because all of us in those
days were asked to make speeches, everyone who was in the war, of course.
And we pushed for Jerry Ford very heavily, and of course we had the backing
of Arthur Vandenberg. Arthur was for Jerry Ford because we wanted Jerry
Ford. We selected him because he’d be the best man for the job.

Smith: Now were there other candidates examined?

Hauenstein: No.

Smith: What was it about Ford? Did he come to you and say I’m interested in this?

Hauenstein: No, he was a member of our organization, so to speak. He was very popular,
very popular in Grand Rapids before the war. Everybody knew him – he was
a friendly sort of person, which was unusual - to find a bunch of Army
officers and Navy officers who were very friendly in those days. His father, of
course, had a great deal of influence because he was the chairman of the
Republican Party – Kent County Republican Party.

Smith: His dad was?
Hauenstein: His dad was.

Smith: Although he and his dad were no friend of McKay’s.

Hauenstein: No, none at all. Not a bit. No, he was as clean as a whistle. He owned a paint shop here and he was a very fine man. He was really a decent guy, as was Jerry that type of person.

Smith: How much of this, because clearly it’s driven by this idea – the internationalist idea – but how much of this was a generational thing? The younger generation taking on the old guard?

Hauenstein: I think it was acceptable. I remember Frank Sparks, editor of the Herald, and Lee Woodruff with the Press. They supported Jerry one hundred percent - he was a popular guy - and I don’t think there was any question but to beat Barney. To beat Barney Jonkman was not particularly easy because, as I said before, five terms and he had also been the prosecuting attorney before that in Grand Rapids. We were a little nervous about it. But the job was done.

Smith: How conservative was this district? Culturally conservative? The story is that early that year he proposed to Betty – but he really couldn’t tell her when they were going to get married and he couldn’t tell her why. And it’s pretty clear that the real reason was – the story over the years was that he wanted to take Jonkman by surprise, at the last minute, and there is something to that. But it’s pretty clear that there was real concern in his camp that his marrying a divorcee would have damaged his prospects in the Republican primary.

Hauenstein: It was an era in which a divorce was not particularly acceptable in this area. That was very true. It was a highly conservative area, highly religious people, and the ethic background of the old school in Europe. It was a factor to be considered. But he was popular enough to carry it.

Smith: Clearly Ford out-campaigned Jonkman.

Hauenstein: Oh he worked day and night. He had a little, I’ve forgotten what we call that, automobile, whatever it was, going from town to town. And it didn’t make any difference whether he was up in Cedar Springs with the red underwear - he was a popular guy. Everybody remembered him from his days of being
such a football star. Even I remembered because I played football against him in high school. He weighed 190 pounds and I weighed 135 wet. I was a half back and he was the center. He clobbered me.

Smith: But I assume he played fair. I assume he clobbered you fair.

Hauenstein: Oh yes. Well, in those days, playing center for a football team was different than it is today. You’d play offense and defense both. He was the guy that ran the team because the center could also catch passes – he could do everything. He could play both ways and Jerry was in every play there was. 190 pounds in high school in those days was a mountain man – and he carried on in Michigan and Yale.

Smith: Did you know Betty back then?

Hauenstein: I’d met her but I didn’t know her. She was kind of in the background a great deal. She stayed in the background very much.

Smith: Were you surprised when he beat Jonkman in the primary?

Hauenstein: No. I think he would have beaten Jonkman other ways, we were so fed up with him. Particularly when we came back. I remember, it was right after the war, it was one of the big first meetings and we asked Barney to speak to us. He told us about how he flew over Alaska and the beautiful sight of Alaska and how they had done when the war was over. We could hardly stand it. So he wasn’t a very popular guy. We had him. I don’t think there was a club in Grand Rapids that some of us didn’t speak to – I don’t care how low down or high it was, but we did the job pretty well.

Smith: What happened, in the end, to Frank McKay?

Hauenstein: I don’t know.

Smith: Was his political power broken?

Hauenstein: Yes. They started going after him, indeed they did. But I don’t remember how he died, exactly. Don’t remember that because I was traveling internationally pretty heavily in those days and I wasn’t around too much.
Smith: So your friendship with Ford obviously evolved over the years?

Hauenstein: Well, actually, we didn’t live too far apart in early days. But the dividing line was such that I went to Central and he went to South, went to a different school.

Smith: Was South as diverse as people make it out to be? The story is that South was a place where, a little bit of on the wrong side of the tracks, but you got a lot more diverse student body than maybe you did at Central.

Hauenstein: Much more so. It was diverse – you are exactly correct on that. Central was elite – I was thinking about that the other day because I think we had only one colored man in the whole class at school at that time. His parents were servants across the street to people over there. Today I guess it’s 90% black, but South was somewhat of a mixture.

Smith: Do you remember the Depression in Grand Rapids?

Hauenstein: Very well.

Smith: How bad was it?

Hauenstein: Terrible. It was really very, very bad. Even those who had something, had nothing, so to speak. I remember, I worked for the Press, in the early days, I remember the great big cop on the corner of Sheldon and Fulton. His job was traffic and it would be winter time – ten below zero and he had to go out there. All they had in those days – there were two traffic lights – only a little signal – he’d have to turn it “Go” – “Stop” – “Go” – “Stop” in freezing weather. The guy would come into the office as a place to get warm and back and forth. He’d say, “I just can’t wait to retire, can’t wait to retire.” I said, “What’s your retire pay?” He said, “My retire pay is going to be $50 a month!” Big stuff – that was big money to be able to retire with $50 a month. But during the Depression things were bad, we had riots. We had people marching on city hall, they turned over automobiles, they burned them.

Smith: Really?

Hauenstein: It was a very serious matter. It was indeed.
Smith: And the main employers in town – I assume at that point were the furniture makers?

Hauenstein: Furniture was the main industry.

Smith: And that suffered along with everyone else?

Hauenstein: Absolutely did. We were identified as the furniture capital of America, as you well know, at the time. No one was buying expensive furniture. It really was very bad. Then it’s about the time the unions decided to organize and they came into Grand Rapids to organize. Then there would be people against them and riots would carry on. Some of the union people would get smashed up and go back to Detroit and Lansing and so forth.

Smith: Has there always been a kind of east versus west rivalry in Michigan? Kind of a cultural divide?

Hauenstein: It’s a very minor degree now, but indeed, there was. Yes, you are quite right. There was, yes.

Smith: And this was always sort of a Republican town?

Hauenstein: Always, although I understand that sometimes we get a few Democrats once in a while – personalities. Yes. The Dutch have had a great influence in the development of the city in every major…

Smith: That would be great, Ralph, if you could describe for people, people who don’t know west Michigan, they’re a little confused to hear about the Dutch and they really don’t know what that means. Describe for someone who doesn’t know this area - who the Dutch are and what their impact on this place has been?

Hauenstein: You can’t say the Dutch without saying the religious – the Christian Reformed Church and the Reformed Church. They were two branches – most of them came over, actually from the first settlement. They were in New Jersey and they came back into Grand Rapids, and then some later came directly from what they called the Old Country. It was not unusual on the streets to hear Dutch spoken with a great deal of frequency. I don’t know
exactly the proportions of their populations overall, but it was a pretty good percentage in any event. They carried their influence religiously to a great extent. And the laws of the city sometimes were predicated on exactly how the religious aspect might be from the religious point of view.

Smith: And that was carried into politics?

Hauenstein: Absolutely carried into politics. It was indeed.

Smith: For example, you couldn’t find anything open on a Sunday?

Hauenstein: No. I can’t put this in here because he was here the other day. I remember when I was having dinner years ago with Pete Cook and he was so mad at this guy Fred Meijer. I said, “What?” And he said, “He’s opening his stores on Sunday.” Today Fred Meijer and Peter Cook are very good friends. I remember when that happened.

Smith: So how did Ford in his political career adapt himself to that?

Hauenstein: Fortunately he could kind of be above the whole thing. You couldn’t say anything bad about Ford because he didn’t do anything bad. He was Episcopalian of course, but he went to church on Sunday and Ford was a political wartime hero. He was a star of great fame and we didn’t have many in those days.

Smith: Did you know Phil Buchen?

Hauenstein: I know Phil, yeah. Not well, but knew him. His partner in law – they started law together.

Smith: Did you ever think that Jerry Ford would wind up in the White House?

Hauenstein: Oh, no. Nor did he. Absolutely not. That was the furthest from his thoughts, I’m sure. It’s always been published that he always wanted to be the leader of the House of Representatives.

Smith: When he was in Congress, did you every lobby him over anything? Ask for anything? The story is told that folks here in Grand Rapids, there was group that wanted a military base and he politely, but firmly discouraged them,
saying that that wasn’t a stable enough element from which to build an economy. I suspect he probably upset a few people. They were thinking, here was Jerry Ford on the Appropriations Committee, with all of his connections with the military.

Hauenstein: I do remember that during the Arab-Israeli war that great factor there. Of course we couldn’t get gasoline – we’d line up for gasoline for miles because the Arabs had shut us off for six months from any fuel. And at that time I remember Jerry proposed a great thing – history has recorded that – I suppose you have that some place – but how many nuclear plants, a couple of hundred, or something like that and drill for oil and a lot of other proposals that he had to make us self-sufficient. Had his suggestions or requirements at that time been fulfilled, we’d be exporting it today. We’d be exporting oil. But that’s how far ahead he was in thinking, so to speak, of the present generation, of people we have now in Washington.

Smith: Let me ask you something, when he was in the White House, he was seen as the most conservative president since Calvin Coolidge. And yet, long before he died, he’d go to convention after convention and he and Mrs. Ford were increasingly almost marooned – pro-choice, sympathetic to gay rights. A whole host of things…the rest of the party went this way, and they went this way. And you wonder whether it was just the party that changed, did they change, how much of an influence was she on him? He seemed like a more, dare I say liberal, at least culturally, socially.

Hauenstein: I probably would give him the identity of being an independent individual. More independent, irrespective of liberal or conservative. He was an independent. He had his own thoughts, of his own mind, of what he wanted to do. He always talked in terms of what would be better, not for himself so much for but for the country. That’s reflected in all the things he did.

Smith: Did you see him in the White House at all? Did you visit?

Hauenstein: Oh yeah.

Smith: You obviously saw him, I assume, after the presidency he came back here a lot.
Hauenstein: He came back here a lot. You have to realize that Jerry hadn’t spent a lot of time here in Grand Rapids. He didn’t have much chance. From high school he went on Yale, and then he got out and he had less than a year I guess and he went into the service, then into the House of Representatives. So he wasn’t in Grand Rapids that much, really.

Smith: How much resentment was there when it was announced that he was going to California, when he was going to live in California after the presidency? Were there people here in Grand Rapids who thought that that was some sort of betrayal?

Hauenstein: Some people did comment on it, but I don’t think it became a major issue. I don’t think so. Some people felt badly about it because he could have carried his influence from here into Washington, and probably to a greater extent that he could from California.

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

Hauenstein: I hadn’t thought about that, no. Betty, of course, after the funeral. I was one of the military honor guards in Washington, Betty sent us some discharged caissons from the 75 mm gun – beautifully engraved stuff. Very thoughtful of her, very nice of her to do that.

Smith: Were you surprised by the reaction to his death, here and elsewhere? The numbers of people and the media coverage.

Hauenstein: Yeah, I was surprised. I remember, of course, the campaign when he was running for office, and the presidency, and I remember Barbara Walters, she was number one of all television at the time. I remember watching, she was interviewing somebody and the individual said he was going to vote for Ford and she said, “How could you vote for Ford? How could anybody vote for Ford?” And she raked him over the coals. Now, Ford was the greatest that ever was to hold the presidency. That’s how things changed so much.

Smith: Of course, in the White House Mrs. Ford was pretty outspoken

Hauenstein: Oh, yes.
Smith: She got into trouble with the *Sixty Minutes* interview and all that. How did that go over – her comments about Susan having an affair or the children using marijuana or her own support for pro-choice?

Hauenstein: I think it followed very much the trend of the city itself. Once we were so conservative, as I spoke about before, but we’re no longer that type of people. We’re far more liberal, far more acceptable of things as they exist and accepting them as they are. I think virtually everything has taken that vein today.

Smith: Which was much less provincial a place – west Michigan has opened up to the world.

Hauenstein: Very much so.

Smith: If you were going to tell people something about Jerry Ford that maybe they didn’t know, for someone who didn’t know him, what would you say – how would you describe him?

Hauenstein: You have to take it to a different context. As a friend, you could say “Jerry” to him. If he’s not the friend you have to say, “Mr. President.”

Smith: Did you call him Jerry?

Hauenstein: Yes, I called him Jerry. Ralph and Jerry. As a matter of fact, he signed his letters to me, always “Jerry.” Never president and so forth. He appreciated that – he liked that. He said he knew immediately where he was when somebody said “Jerry.” If he was in a crowd of people, then Mr. President. Somebody would say “Hi, Jerry,” he knew they were from Grand Rapids. His old football team or something like that. He knew exactly where he was. He appreciated it. There was nothing highly sophisticated about Jerry Ford. Nothing.

Smith: That’s just what we’re looking for, Ralph, thank you.
INDEX

B
Buchen, Phil, 8–9

C
Cook, Peter, 8

D
Dutch influence, 4, 7–8
Dutch Reformed Church
influence of, 8

F
Ford, Betty
Sixty Minutes, 11
Ford, Gerald R.
character traits, 11–12
funeral, reactions to, 10–11
move to Rancho Mirage, 10
social issues, 9–10
Ford, Gerald Sr.
character traits, 4

G
Grand Rapids, Michigan
Depression years, 6–7
Grand Rapids Press, 4

M
McKay, Frank, 1, 5–6
Meijer, Fred, 8

S
Sparks, Frank, 4

V
Vandenberg, Sen. Arthur, 1–3

W
Woodruff, Lee, 4

Y
Yonkman, Barney, 3–4