

**Gerald R. Ford Oral History Project**  
**Richard Wennekamp**  
**Interviewed by**  
**Richard Norton Smith**  
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Smith: Back us up to how your life's path first crossed that of Gerald Ford.

Wennekamp: Well, it was really pure coincidence and nothing I can take credit for as far as a plan. I had gone back to Washington, DC; accepted a political appointment in the summer of '74 when President Nixon was still in office. And I can't take credit envisioning anything interesting happening.

Smith: What was the appointment?

Wennekamp: The appointment was a political appointment in the Office of the Secretary of Commerce doing some management consulting work, really.

Smith: Who was secretary then?

Wennekamp: Secretary Dent. At the time, as I mentioned, President Nixon was still in office and I didn't envision an impeachment or resignation, but I saw that the Democrats would probably win the White House in '76. So I thought two years back there would be good experience; learn about the legislative process and everything and then come back to California.

Smith: California was home?

Wennekamp: Yes. And interestingly enough, I accepted the job and then ten days before reporting to work, President Ford was sworn in as president. And so my resume, if you will, has always been connected with the Ford administration. I wasn't back there very long and happened to meet some people who worked at the White House, Warren Rustand for example, was the President's appointment secretary. And he suggested that I start – I did some part-time work with the White House advance office, and seemed to have a knack for that. It went very well.

Smith: And what did that entail?

Wennekamp: That entailed domestic events arrangements, advancing for the President's attendance at a conference or meeting. And being a junior person, I assisted White House staff advance people; you've probably have met some of them, Red Cavaney and Frank Ursomarso, and Bob Goodwin and others.

Smith: Is Frank still around?

Wennekamp: Yes. Frank's still around. He's back east. As a matter of fact, I saw he's a trustee now on the Foundation.

Smith: Good. Remember that name: Frank Ursomarso.

Wennekamp: He was around there a long time.

Smith: One of the people we talked to, who I think was even more junior than you, was Mary Fisher. She told wonderful stories about of course being the first and only woman. And if there was a place below the bottom of the totem pole, she occupied it.

Wennekamp: Yeah, Mary and I worked a lot together. With the passage of time I was offered a full-time position at the White House, and a commission as staff assistant to the President and started working over in the OEM, next door in the Advance Office. I got involved in a lot of the international trips, fortunately. A very, very wonderful experience.

Smith: For people who have heard the term but don't know what it is, what does an advance man do?

Wennekamp: An advance man is, in essence, the President's personal representative in coordinating all the details associated with his visit. And what you would do once a particular site was selected – a good example, I think, would be, he's going to meet with President Sadat in Salzburg, Austria. And so you go over there and you are the President's representative in negotiating everything. When it comes to toasting, who toasts first and in what language and in what room? Who enters first? Who's last? And you coordinate this with the press, the Secret Service, the White House communications, local media, the embassy. And so you are responsible for coordinating all of these details and making sure that everything goes off to the minute. You are faxing back – we

didn't have faxes - but telexing back communications and memos to the White House with diagrams of what's going to happen, when it's happening, etc. So it's literally thinking of every minute detail that could affect the President's visit and making sure that it runs smoothly.

Smith: And then, of course, ironically, at the end it was the rain slicked staircase.

Wennekamp: Well, interesting you bring that one up because I happened to have been, and maybe in President Ford's eyes, maybe responsible for that. But Air Force One had just pulled up and it was an exterior arrival – no gates or anything. So he came down the steps, but before the steps – most of the steps were put in place, the red carpet was rolled out, and I escorted the Chancellor and the Bürgermeister from Salzburg out; put them in position and then stepped back at the end behind them with the military aide and watched President and Mrs. Ford come down.

As you probably know, as the nation knows, the mistake he made was, he's holding an umbrella with one hand and her arm with the other and not the rail. He came down and his foot slipped; it tore off the heel of his shoe and he went down on hands and knees. When he went down and he got up, he looked at me and he's just red as a beet. He is so frustrated, so embarrassed, but it was like he was looking at me like, "Why did you allow this to happen?" There was nothing I could do. But he recovered; kind of limped down, greeting everyone and went on to the press conference.

But I will say that that was the beginning of the clumsy reputation because that was an international event and the whole world sees it - the President planting on all fours. He was really irritated.

Smith: Was there any sequel? I mean, did you hear from anyone?

Wennekamp: No one – because it was obvious what had happened when you saw his heel still sitting there on the steps of the ramp and it's all wet.

Smith: He was carrying the umbrella over Mrs. Ford?

Wennekamp: He was holding it up for both of them, and then holding her arm as they came down. And I still have that picture.

Smith: Do you think he got a bum rap?

Wennekamp: Oh, absolutely. When it comes to his clumsy reputation – the guy was an athlete. He was a jock and took great pride in that, as he always had. And so that really bothered him. But like in so many other things, he shrugged it off, like water on a duck. There were a few times when he would get irritated. We were down in Texas and a reporter tried to report that President Ford had raised the wrong two fingers for the football team.

Smith: The hook ‘em horns?

Wennekamp: Yeah. And he heard that and he was really irritated, to the point that he would not talk to that particular reporter again.

Smith: He had a temper he spent a lifetime controlling, and pretty effectively for the most part. We asked Mary and she had a couple of amusing examples. Did you ever see his temper?

Wennekamp: Oh, yes. He had a temper like any CEO would have a temper. The worst time that I had with him from a temper perspective was – this was when he was a former president – jumping ahead in the sequence. But when he was a former president, we were on one of his infamous trips. We were on the road about twenty out of thirty days a month. We were in, I think it was Kansas City and we had to fly to Chicago for a speech. We’d put the trips together so that they were a mixture of his participating in a charity golf tournament, doing something political, doing an honorarium speech, and that honorarium speech would usually be the vehicle that would provide the transportation. And then he would usually try to do as many times as possible, an academic visit to one of the universities.

So you’d put this combo together, but transportation is provided by the association or the corporation who he is doing the honorarium speech for. And so we were leaving for breakfast, going over the day’s schedule, and he happened to ask me what kind of aircraft do we have going to Chicago? I told him that we had a Learjet, which to me is a nice aircraft. And he went ballistic. He said, “That’s ridiculous. I can’t even stand up in that plane. If they want me to speak there, they should give me a plane that’s decent, good

transportation.” He was really angry and I was really disappointed and angry, too, that he could be that spoiled. And so we stopped talking and it was silence – like a husband and wife. We get to Chicago and we get in a limo and we’re driving into downtown from Midway, and like a husband and wife, he breaks the silence by some innocuous comment about the weather. Just to break it, and then everything came back to normal. But, yeah, he had a temper, but I didn’t see it that often. He had great control.

Smith: When you started at the White House – let’s see, you started at the beginning of the Ford presidency?

Wennekamp: Yeah, I started working over there in ’75.

Smith: In ’75 – so this is post-pardon?

Wennekamp: Exactly.

Smith: Where were you when the pardon – were you still at the Commerce Department?

Wennekamp: Yes, I was still at Commerce.

Smith: Were you surprised?

Wennekamp: Absolutely. But at the time – my only question was why he didn’t do it sooner? But then I realized why he couldn’t. Then over the years of listening to him answer the question over and over and over again, I became so thoroughly convinced that what he did was the right thing. And not in his personal best interests at all and he knew that.

Smith: Contrast him with poor Lyndon Johnson, who died the day before the Vietnam peace agreement was announced – at least Gerald Ford lived long enough to know that most people had come around to his way of thinking. And the real tipping point, or maybe it was just a cherry on the sundae, was the Profiles in Courage Award from the Kennedy Library. He said, “Everywhere I’ve gone for twenty years, people ask the same question. They don’t ask it anymore.” It’s as if the Kennedy imprimatur made it go away.

Wennekamp: Yeah, it's interesting, I hadn't thought about the timing, but you are right. You are very right.

Smith: The first several months of the Ford presidency you were at the Commerce Department. Like everyone else, you watched him from a distance and presumably formed some opinions about the man and his approach to the job. Once you actually became part of the White House and saw it up close, were any of those assumptions challenged?

Wennekamp: To the contrary. I found that he was as real and as down to earth and as engaging as he came across in press conferences or in meetings, etc. Almost to point that you had to be careful that you didn't become too familiar.

Smith: Really?

Wennekamp: Yeah, because he made it so easy to be his friend, you had to remember what your job was, and that you were dealing with the President of the United States. But he made it so comfortable. And that, I think, gave rise to an environment, an association, a cadre of people that worked for him that were of like-mind. Very, very decent, hardworking, highly ethical, great morals and values – that thread just ran through.

We had the annual meetings back in Washington, the reunions, if you will, and we often reflect on that. What a great group of people that happened to come together. I'm not saying that he did it, because he didn't handpick, but just by association of the type of people. It was a phenomenal, phenomenal experience.

Smith: Everyone knows he loved to be on the road. What was it about that experience that he found so enjoyable?

Wennekamp: Yeah, I know. But you're right, it was back when he was a congressman. He was on the road all the time. He just loved the mobility. I think his family paid a price for that. But again, as a former president, I would travel with him and ask him, "Why do you need to do this?" The honorariums, the corporate boards, everything. He'd just built the house there in Rancho Mirage, and he had a mortgage on it, and he said, "I want to pay the house off." It was a

Depression mentality there, and I talked to him at one time about the tax advantages of a mortgage, the investing, the funds. “Nope, I’ve got to pay this house off.”

Smith: He must have enjoyed the process of going to those events and talking, I suppose, to local pols, and eating rubber chicken – just the whole ritual of life on the road. He really traveled until around his 90<sup>th</sup> birthday, and then his doctors told him basically to lay off. And one senses, without being melodramatic, that part of him died before he died, because he was denied that which gave him such pleasure.

Wennekamp: Exactly. And you could see it when he would give a speech. If he stumbled he’d be angry with himself afterwards. Penny was good at building it back up, if you will. But when he had the ceremony for the anniversary for his inauguration in Statuary Hall, he stumbled a little bit there, and I could tell that he was angry with himself; he was frustrated.

Smith: Let me add a sequel because I wrote that speech.

Wennekamp: Is that right?

Smith: Yeah. He said afterwards, “That’s the last time I’m speaking in public.”

Wennekamp: Yeah, you could see it.

Smith: And the only time I ever saw a temper was exactly that. He wouldn’t wear glasses. He’d come up with something like the lighting angle was wrong, or the placement of the speech on podium was off, or something. But I know exactly what you mean. He had standards.

Wennekamp: Exactly, high standards. He was funny because, like a lot of politicians, I guess, and a lot of celebrities - comedians particularly, he could turn it on. He loved people. He could be engaging, a man’s man. It’s like he never met someone that wasn’t a friend. But when he was alone, he liked to be alone. He wasn’t this bubbly gregarious kind of guy. He made it very down to earth, very serious, and you see that in a lot of people. I find that interesting, how that works.

Smith: That is interesting. When you were in the White House, were there particular foreign trips that you remember? Were you on the trip to Japan?

Wennekamp: No, I was not.

Smith: So you had nothing to do with his short pants?

Wennekamp: No. I went to Japan with him later, as a former president. I think the Salzburg trip, primarily because he took such great pride in that, in dealing with President Sadat. He had a great respect for President Sadat, as a lot of us do. But he hit it off so well with the President in negotiating the Sinai II agreement.

Smith: Why do you think that was? They would seem to be two very different kinds of people.

Wennekamp: I don't know. I think they were both true statesmen. They didn't have hidden agendas. President Ford never did – that was obvious, anyway. He was very shrewd.

Smith: I assume Ford, whether you agreed with him or not, did instill a sense of trust.

Wennekamp: Oh, absolutely.

Smith: And that's probably not universally the case among public figures. But when you stop to think about the people he became very close to - Giscard D'Estaing seems to be a temperamental opposite. Lord Callaghan was an old line Labor Party Socialist, and yet they seemed to have become very good friends.

Wennekamp: Exactly.

Smith: Even Jimmy Carter in later years.

Wennekamp: Particularly interesting to me because if you're looking at anecdotal situations, after the campaign, after the '76 campaign, you know as everyone, how truly disappointed President Ford was that we didn't pull it off. And it was so close, none of us expected that outcome. We thought it was a great possibility, but our expectations had risen to the point that we thought it was

really going to be President Ford's election. And he was very, very disappointed.

Smith: Was he down?

Wennekamp: He was down. At first I could see he resented who he lost to, an outsider.

Smith: We've been told he went around the day after, and for some time saying, "I can't believe I lost to a peanut farmer."

Wennekamp: Exactly right. But at the same time, this is one of those things that rank way up there relative to what impresses me about President Ford, given that feeling, given the disappointment and resentment etc., the first time President Carter calls and asks for President Ford, President Ford takes the phone, and without missing a beat, says, "Yes, Mr. President." The respect, he's gracious, he's kind, and he's professional. He listens to President Carter and then says, "Okay, this is what you do, call Tip O'Neill....," and goes through A, B, C, D, giving guidance on how to deal with the situation, or move this particular issue.

Smith: Is it your sense this was still early in the Carter presidency?

Wennekamp: Oh, yes. This was right after President Ford became a former president. And I had such respect for him for that reason. Knowing how he felt personally, and then to step back and divorce himself from that and deal with the President of the United States as he should be dealt with.

Smith: Now the story always has been that the professional relationship began during the Carter presidency when President Ford helped out lobbying senators on the Panama Canal treaties, which was something he didn't have to do. And probably didn't win him a whole lot of points among some in his party. But supposedly, the personal relationship really began on that long trip to and from the Sadat funeral.

Wennekamp: That's what I understand. And that was after I had moved on. I'd left in late 1980 and they were not, at that time, good friends. But like you said, he was fully supportive on Panama, which didn't win him a lot of friends in the Republican Party; and then the recognition of China versus Taiwan was the

other thing that a number of people in his own administration, like Dr. Kissinger, wasn't real happy about.

Smith: Really?

Wennekamp: And I think that maybe the most challenging intellectual exercise I ever had was that he walked in the office and told me what he had just committed to do relative to Panama, for example, with President Carter. And I didn't personally agree with his taking that position, but my task was to write up the response to the letters that would be coming in the next day of why did you do this? What are talking about? How could you do this? So I had to write up the letter, if you will, that would be used in correspondence to explain.

Smith: Did he have input into that?

Wennekamp: Oh I drafted it and had him look at it and we were good to go. But it's an interesting exercise that I've used several times with people – you can have your own convictions, but you have to be open minded. And I had to be very open minded.

Smith: Were you at the Kansas City convention?

Wennekamp: Yes, I was.

Smith: What are your memories of that?

Wennekamp: Oh that was phenomenal. The backroom shenanigans, if you will, relative to Ford and Reagan and the caucuses and the delegates.

Smith: And because it was still not nailed down...

Wennekamp: No, it was not. It was not nailed down at all. So it was really very, very interesting to watch that and be a part of it. His winning the nomination was absolutely great. His selection of Senator Dole surprised a lot of us. Surprised me. As a matter of fact, I remember, I mentioned Frank Ursomarso earlier, but one of the things that Frank and I had to do was go over and get Senator and Elizabeth Dole and sneak them into the Crown Plaza Hotel. And it was not easy because the media was all over everything, and we had these cars that were like bubbles, an old Pacer. There were big windows all around the thing

and we drive over to the Crown Plaza and there's a long queue to get down to the parking lot. I couldn't wait in the queue so I just drove down the ramp and waited for the car that was waiting for the gate to go up and just slip right through with it. The media saw that and they are running down the ramp and we spirit the Doles out and into the hotel. Some of them had gotten the clue.

Smith: Who else was on the list, because various names have been bandied about over the years in terms of people who were seriously considered? Howard Baker, being one. There is some debate over whether Anne Armstrong's name ever was actually tossed around.

Wennekamp: I'm not sure. I do know, relative to the Vice President, I know that he was very disappointed to have to drop Nelson Rockefeller.

Smith: I don't know if he told you, but I've been working for nine years on a biography of Nelson Rockefeller.

Wennekamp: Oh, I saw that, yes.

Smith: I'm always interested in anything that anyone can add. I mean, was he disappointed at the time, or was he disappointed after the fact?

Wennekamp: Disappointed at the time. Particularly when he had to tell Nelson that they were not going to be able to be on the ticket together. And it was so painfully obvious that it was the conservative wing of the party. But it was very hard for him, because he had great respect for Mr. Rockefeller.

Smith: Did you see Rockefeller at that time?

Wennekamp: No, I did not. No.

Smith: You wonder if the White House waited too long to take Reagan seriously. Either thinking he might not run at all or underestimating just how potent a challenger he would be.

Wennekamp: In '76?

Smith: In '76.

- Wennekamp: Okay. Yeah, I think so. I know a number of them did in 1980. I don't know if you've ever heard the stories about President Ford's scenario, if you will, relative to 1980.
- Smith: I'd like to. I know that there were those on the outside who were urging him to run in 1980.
- Wennekamp: Yeah, and he was doing a lot of traveling, which was done for exposure and charity and personal gain, but in essence, he was in Rancho Mirage. And now this is somewhat my personal interpretation – he really thought that the party would come down Sand Dune Road and give him an invitation to be the nominee. And so he kind of laid back. Carter was still doing very well in the polls. The economy was still doing well in early '80. Reagan was throwing his name around and a number of President Ford's friends on the Hill advised him, "Look, don't muddy the waters right now. Carter's doing very well. Let Reagan run around and do the primary things kind of be beneath you, as a former president – get out there in New Hampshire in the snow, etc." So he listened to that. Well, then with the passage of time, he had the confluence of a couple of events, like the economy and the Iranian hostage situation; Carter's popularity dropped severely, Reagan started picking up in the polls, and now President Ford is watching this and saying, "Wait a minute." He goes back to his friends and they, in essence, told him now it would be divisive of the Party for you to come in, so just wait. And so he saw this come and go, and it really bothered him. It really did.
- Smith: But the bell rings and the old warhorse responds. I assume there must have been a complex series of layers because Mrs. Ford had only recently had her intervention, and there is good reason to believe that she would not have encouraged him to do this.
- Wennekamp: That's right.
- Smith: What was your sense of that?
- Wennekamp: I would totally agree with that. As you know, better than I, their intention was to go back to Michigan and she was happy with that. And then moving out to Rancho Mirage after that stint as First Lady and President was a total course

change. It was a sea change for them to their personal lives. And she wasn't real happy out there.

Smith: Really?

Wennekamp: No, because she didn't really have a lot of friends there. And like I said, he was traveling 20-30 days a month and she was pretty much alone.

Smith: Because by that time the kids were pretty much grown up. And I don't mean to put words in her mouth, but one can imagine her thinking, the one good thing about losing the election is, I'm going to get my husband back. Only to discover that it really wasn't very different from what it had been before he was president. .

Wennekamp: No, because he didn't change. Exactly right. And he wasn't going to change.

Smith: Were you aware that she had a problem, however defined?

Wennekamp: Yeah. It was painfully obvious. I think it's unfortunate that it went on so long. It dates way back to when he was in the House. It's unfortunate.

Smith: Was it an issue during the White House years?

Wennekamp: Not as much as it was when you got into Rancho Mirage. And again, I think that's in large part because of the loneliness, the absence of responsible activities and things like that. That can get everybody up. And when you have really nothing to look forward to, you can let yourself go a little bit more. But it was unfortunate that it took as long as it did. But I personally was pleasantly surprised that the intervention worked as effectively as it did.

Smith: Was this something that was sort of sprung on everyone. We've heard that Susan was instrumental in trying to organize things. Was her dad on the road, or was this planned in advance?

Wennekamp: He had been on the road. I can't remember how many days he was back before that. I think it was on a Sunday. But we hadn't been back a long time. I know he was on one trip – everything that really brought it to a head – he was on a trip back east. I was not with him on this trip. And Secret Service notified me that Mrs. Ford was very upset and wanted to leave the residence

and they were not allowing it. And so we contacted the President and he changed his trip. As a matter of fact, he got Dr. Kissinger to take his speech in Virginia, I think, and flew directly home. And then from that it really developed. Which thank God that happened.

Smith: What was the mood while all of this was unfolding? For those of you who were on the outside but close observers, and in some ways participants in their lives?

Wennekamp: Of great, great concern. Because if they weren't able to pull off the intervention, what next? How do you deal with this without getting so terribly public that it would be counterproductive?

Smith: I can imagine her feelings at the time – what are people going to say? Just that sort of natural reaction. Was there concern about that on the part of all of you who were really, first and foremost, concerned about her well-being?

Wennekamp: Foremost, absolutely. And with her, I think there was a degree of denial, as there usually is.

Smith: Denial that a problem existed.

Wennekamp: Exactly – to the depths of what it was. But it was challenging. I sometimes wondered if – just personal reflection off-record, if you will – he wasn't escaping with his travels and his trips.

Smith: That's an interesting observation. Over the years it's been suggested that he felt a certain degree of guilt for being away as much as he was, and perhaps inadvertently contributing to the situation. But that's a valid theory.

In the immediate aftermath, did it take a while for this to be judged a success? She went to Long Beach for X amount of time.

Wennekamp: The Naval Hospital in Long Beach. Right, which is a very difficult time, because, even when that happened, as I'm sure you've heard from Susan and others, that everyone underestimated the severity of the problem. When they put her on detox, it wasn't right because they made some calculations that were wrong and it was nearly disastrous. They had to unwind that and start

over. But I think the family - I think it really brought the family a lot closer because they were off all doing their own thing. Now Susan was young and she'd just gotten married. But I was proud of them and I was proud of him. He really did everything that was necessary.

Smith: People talk, understandably, about the courage she displayed at the time of the breast cancer surgery.

Wennekamp: I was just thinking of that myself.

Smith: But I was thinking, just as she set an example for countless women, so did he, for husbands. How to respond to this, and likewise with the drinking issue, because he stopped.

Wennekamp: Oh, yeah. Stopped cold. And he loved to have a drink just like most of us, whether it is a martini or Jack Daniels or something. But he went cold turkey because he knew it wasn't the right thing to do – wasn't fair.

Smith: One sense he was a man of great self-discipline.

Wennekamp: Yes.

Smith: Because I know later on he was upbraiding Susan for smoking. And she sort of threw it back in his face with his pipes. And he got rid of the pipes – sent them off to the Library, I think. All the ceremonial pipes, the gift pipes, he just – cold turkey again.

Wennekamp: He was disciplined. Very much so. Yeah.

Smith: And what about the relationship with the kids? How did that evolve over time?

Wennekamp: You know, I don't know. I wasn't that involved with the kids – to the degree they came around the compound, if you will, in Rancho Mirage. But not that much involved, not as much as Greg Willard who worked with them during the campaign and became personal friends with the kids. I dealt really primarily with the President and Mrs. Ford.

Smith: Let's go back to right after the election. There are a number of things going on: wanting to have a successful transition; smooth handover; and at a certain time, to get on with your own life. Was there ever any doubt that on January 20<sup>th</sup> they would be going anywhere other than Southern California? By then was that decision pretty well taken?

Wennekamp: I think it was pretty much taken. I remember right afterward a lot of us going out to Palm Springs where they had been spending the winters, if you will, when they weren't at Vail. And they had a place there. We all got a bunch of places to stay and started working on our resumes because we hadn't anticipated the fact that we were going to be unemployed, and none of us had a clue what we were going to do. But the fact that he was going to end up out there was pretty much concluded. The disadvantage he had, unlike so many other former presidents, is that he didn't anticipate being a former president, and therefore had not set himself up, if you will. Hadn't got his house built and all the security issues taken care of. As you look back, in more contemporary times, all the presidents knew – President Nixon had himself all set up in San Clemente and Johnson – everyone had pretty much set it up.

Smith: And let's face it, some of the criticism he took for "commercializing" the former presidency - he didn't have much money when he left office.

Wennekamp: Oh, no, as a matter of fact – I think it's been written that he didn't have a savings account until he was a former president. As a congressman, they lived hand to mouth, and the presidency was such a short period of time, and so then he became former president and had the benefit of the pensions and the honorariums and stuff like that. And finally, financially, he got it together.

Smith: Now, when they went out there initially, where did they live?

Wennekamp: They rented a house up in the hills by Palm Springs near Rancho Mirage. And we rented another house for offices, etc. And then, as you probably know, he was able to work out a deal with Ambassador Firestone, who owned part of a lot right next to his place on the 13<sup>th</sup> green at Thunderbird. And he was able to buy that lot and then friends of Ford, if you will, bought the house next to that

and had it converted into facilities that would accommodate the office for Gerald R. Ford and the Secret Service.

Smith: Was that the Ginger Rogers house?

Wennekamp: That was the Ginger Rogers house, right. Ginger Rogers bought that for her mother, I think.

Smith: Which is now the office complex.

Wennekamp: And then she owned half a lot next door, so Ford bought half a lot from Ambassador Firestone and half a lot from Ginger Rogers and put that together for his residence, and then that became the compound.

Smith: So they built their house there?

Wennekamp: Yes.

Smith: And presumably were involved in its design and layout and everything else.

Wennekamp: Oh yeah, very much so. The interior design and everything, yeah. That was a full time job for Mrs. Ford, too.

Smith: Is it more his house or her house?

Wennekamp: It's more her house. Yeah. But it turned out beautifully.

Smith: It must have been fun to design a house after all those years.

Wennekamp: You have the pool and the dog run; Ambassador Firestone had the tennis courts, so they didn't have to worry about that. But it was nice, it was very nice.

Smith: I take it Leonard Firestone was a very pivotal figure in that his story and Mrs. Ford's become enmeshed - that they are almost co-founders of the Betty Ford Center.

Wennekamp: Oh, yeah. The financial support that he provided for the Betty Ford Center was phenomenal. Very gracious, a true gentleman.

Smith: That's what I've heard.

Wennekamp: I really admired him.

Smith: In those early days, would the kids come back for visits or were they at that point pretty well on their own?

Wennekamp: They were pretty much out on their own. I think the biggest time the family got together would be during the winter time up in Vail and then subsequently Beaver Creek.

Smith: Tell us about the house in Vail, because I've never been in it.

Wennekamp: They built that and now I'm gone again. In Vail they always rented the Bass residence and then they built in Beaver Creek, and I've never been in Beaver Creek.

Smith: I'm told they loved Vail, but I'm also told they were beloved in Vail.

Wennekamp: Oh, yes. Matter of fact, one of the runs up at Beaver Creek now is named after President Ford. They couldn't do enough for him, the community as a whole. It was beautiful, it really was.

Smith: Did you ever have the feeling that you wished more people could know them as you knew them?

Wennekamp: Oh, absolutely. Even today when I talk about what kind of a person he was, particularly him, people are just amazed that he was so real. So touchable, if you will. He was stubborn, but he was still open-minded. He would listen if the two of you were doing the pros and cons on something, he was very open-minded and he loved to listen to the debate, and hear the exchange and the advantages and disadvantages. And then make the decision. Stubborn and tenacious.

Smith: And fiscally conservative, is it safe to say?

Wennekamp: Yes. And I remember when we would be traveling and he'd get off the plane and the press would be there and he'd make comments. He'd want to go to the mike and make some comments, and then he'd go to the event that evening, and it would be the same comments. So we were at one stop – as a matter of fact it was in this hotel, I remember, we were in the suite - and I told him,

“You may or may not appreciate this but, I think that you would be better off if you’d reserve your comments for the dinner, because you are saying the same thing at the airport. So everybody has already heard your one liners, your bullet points, etc. And so you could cut down on that...” And he said, “No. I have something to say and I’m going to say it. I’m going to get the point across.” I said, “Okay. Go for it.”

Smith: As time went by, the party moved further and further to the right, particularly on social issues. And it wasn’t just abortion; it was a number of issues where they [the Fords] really were at variance with where the party was going. I’ve often wondered whether that was simply the party moving as he stayed the same; how much of that was that my imagination, how much it was her influence; or was it just him growing, listening to different sides, whatever. For example, he’s the only president ever to sign a petition on gay rights. And that’s not what you would have thought of Gerald Ford in the White House. In the White House he was the most conservative president since Calvin Coolidge. Well, then came Ronald Reagan and it sort of smashed all those records. But he just seemed, as he got older, to become more open, more...

Wennekamp: Broadminded.

Smith: More broadminded is a very good way of putting it.

Wennekamp: My own personal speculation is that as he got out of Washington, got away from the Beltway – he had a juxtaposition of exposure to corporate America through the boards, academia, charities, and the combination. I think it was a broadening experience. Because he heard a different perspective than I think he had. Yes, you have economic councils, and you have summit meetings and everything, but for him as an individual to be exposed and have those interchanges, I think was a broadening experience for him.

Smith: But you first have to have a mind open enough to hear that and not reject it *a priori*.

Wennekamp: And that goes back to the comment I made about him loving the debate. He really had an insatiable appetite for information.

Smith: And the newspapers - my experience was, you never traveled anywhere without...

Wennekamp: Stacks. *Financial Times*, *New York Times*, yeah. Voracious reader. Interesting. So many contradictions as an individual.

Smith: How so?

Wennekamp: You think of him as this big jock, but then you have this law student and you have this coach and you've got this politician, and you have this gregarious guy that could work the crowds, but still intellectual when it came to his curiosity. And I think the thing that disappointed me the most was the bad rap he got for his intellectual capacity, because he was so much brighter than people gave him credit for. And his instincts were phenomenal on what to pursue and what not to pursue.

Smith: How would you illustrate that?

Wennekamp: Well, something would come up, I think it had something to do with the Warren Commission, but something hit the news and we were getting calls from AP and everybody for a comment. I can't remember all the details, but he suggested that I call Kelly, who was the director of the FBI at the time, ask Kelley a question. I apologize, I can't remember the details, but I responded and President Ford said, "Okay, no comment. It will die." And he was right on. Great instincts and the advice that he would give - like I said with President Carter and how to handle things. His instincts on how to deal with the Hill.

Smith: And the irony is, at that point in his life his relationship with Tip O'Neill was undoubtedly much closer than Jimmy Carter's ever was.

Wennekamp: Oh yeah. Absolutely.

Smith: You mentioned the Warren Commission; again, that must have been another question that dogged him wherever he went. He did an oral history with someone at the Kennedy Library about the Warren Commission, and he said something quite remarkable. One of the theories that was discussed among the commissioners was that Lee Harvey Oswald was sexually impotent, and he

was going to show Marina, who apparently had been taunting him, just how much of a man he was. And it was apparently discussed seriously among the commission members, but it wasn't put into the report, I think for reasons of taste.

Wennekamp: Yeah, I can understand that. It's interesting you say that because when I look back, we talked about the pardon and how that was such an issue that dogged him. When I look back at the correspondence, there were things that just never went away. Not that they were the most voluminous, but just consistently over the years - the pardon, of course, the Warren Commission, and Roswell, Arizona and the aliens and whether or not he knew. Is this what they look like? It just went on and on.

Smith: What did he think about the alien question?

Wennekamp: Finally I couldn't resist it. I said, "Could you just do me the favor - is this true or not?" And he said, "Aw, there's nothing to it." But the little twinkle in his eye...made me still wonder.

Smith: You know, for all of his openness there are people who think he took some secrets with him.

Wennekamp: I believe so, and maybe for good reason.

Smith: It probably goes back to that self-disciplined nature. He was capable of keeping a secret.

Wennekamp: Exactly. And I'll tell people today that people complain about not knowing enough, or not understanding, or the media not giving enough information, etc., that from the time I started with him, I came to the personal realization that most of us are better off not knowing everything. I had the good fortune of reading the security briefings that would be brought out to him on a weekly basis - the military would bring them out literally handcuffed to a briefcase, and you'd get the briefing and then he'd read it and then I'd have to literally burn it and flush the ashes down the toilet.

Smith: Really?

Wennekamp: Because there weren't shredding machines and stuff like that. But what I read told me that there are a lot of things that we don't need to know because a lot of it is speculation and why scare people? But to your point, I think that's the case, he probably did.

Smith: I assume he appreciated the fact that President Carter took pains to keep him informed.

Wennekamp: Oh, yeah. Which was obviously to President Carter's advantage, to keep him so. Keep him abreast of what's happening.

Smith: When did you move into the offices? Was it a while?

Wennekamp: Yes, it took a good nine months to reconfigure everything. I stayed in Washington for the first six months following the inauguration and managed the office across the street in Jefferson Square, where we put together a small staff of about thirty-nine people.

Smith: And how did that work?

Wennekamp: We literally had a mini White House, if you will. There was a correspondence office, a scheduling office, a legal, a press. The former president's budget runs for six months and then it significantly drops down. So what we had to do was, once we were in a position of doing it, would be to hire people at significantly less salary than the executive secretary was getting at the White House. Take the executive secretary out, have her train the individual in Palm Springs or Rancho Mirage, bring this one back, let her go and then move forward with a significantly reduced staff at a reduced overhead relative to salary. And then in six months close the office.

Smith: What would you say to people who think "the imperialist presidency" - they get all this money, they get all these staffs - and what are they doing to earn it?

Wennekamp: From the contribution that I saw him make, it was money well-spent. I remember in the budgetary discussions on the budget for the former President after the transition, I'd get calls from senators asking questions about the volume of correspondence, etc. Trying for justification of why do we need to

continue to have this staff and this much of an expense? And everyone is amazed at how many of the citizens of this country were communicating, not because they wanted to make him wealthy, but because they had questions, they wanted his opinion. Of course, there was scheduling, there were invitations, and things, but the number of people who wanted a card for their mother turning 100 years old - it's a position that goes on. That's why he's still called President Ford. I mean, that's why he was. That's a position that goes on.

Smith: I assume as a former congressman, for whom answering the mail promptly was the *sine quo non* of official success - that carried over to his post-White House days. The mail was your tyrant.

Wennekamp: Exactly right. And we had a great staff handling all of that.

Smith: In those early days, how was the operation organized?

Wennekamp: Basically scheduling and correspondence were the two key functions.

Smith: Now, Bob Barrett was chief of staff?

Wennekamp: Yeah, Bob Barrett was chief of staff. He was involved a lot in the negotiations for the NBC contract and the book and things like that. And I did a lot of the traveling, a lot of the scheduling - the details - the old advance work, if you will, and pretty much managed the office. But it worked very effectively, it really did. President Ford had his personal secretary. Now Mrs. Ford was not happy that the former President's budget did not include anything for the former First Lady. And so she resented the fact that there was nothing in there for an office for her, stationary and all this kind of stuff. Which does make sense, because she was highly regarded and respected and she got a lot of correspondence. And so we were able to design the offices in such a way that she had an office right next to his, and we got stationary, which he paid for, but appeased her, too. She had her office, but she kept busy in that regard, too.

Smith: Was there such a thing as a typical day there in those early years right after he had come out there? *If* he was there?

- Wennekamp: If he was there, a typical day: he'd eat breakfast, go for a swim, and come over to the office, probably around nine; read; and then go into the correspondence. Then go into answering phone calls and meeting on the schedule and planning events, planning the next trip, if you will. But he was good at maintaining contact with people, much better than I am. He was on the phone or writing to people all the time. I don't think he ever got into emailing. I don't think so.
- Smith: Penny said apparently he learned to play solitaire on the computer. And people could email him, and he understood that; he just didn't understand responding in kind. And he was famously not adept with phones?
- Wennekamp: No.
- Smith: They were technologically and mechanically beyond his...
- Wennekamp: He's like me and a lot of guys that, if it weren't for my wife, the VCR would still flash twelve. He was like that.
- Smith: There was a large volume of mail?
- Wennekamp: Oh, yes, tons of mail. It really, really kept us busy. We developed what I thought was good boilerplate responses that you can personalize. But again, that was before computers, so it was on an old mag card, IBM typewriters. It seems so antiquated now.
- Smith: I've heard that as the staff became progressively more populated with females that the word went out from on high - "I don't want gossiping, I don't want backbiting." I assume he'd seen it on the Hill and he just didn't want a staff that was wasting its energies in that kind of back and forth.
- Wennekamp: When you talk about the staff, and this is not anything of profound record, but given how personable, how engaging he was, he wasn't comfortable walking around and talking with the staff. You know how a very effective way to manage is to manage by walking around, but he stayed in his office. He wasn't comfortable, and I don't know why.

Smith: As you know, most politicians love gossip, it's a second language. And I don't mean just political gossip, I mean just gossip. And my sense is he was visibly uncomfortable, to the point where he would find a way to change the subject. A waste of time, or sometimes bordered on malicious. I don't know how to describe it, but he was just visibly uncomfortable.

Wennekamp: I think in large part because he knew how damaging malicious rumors can be in the political environment, and he had no use for rumor and innuendo and hearsay.

Smith: And Oliver Stone.

Wennekamp: Yeah, exactly. True. He took life very seriously, but could have a good time. Golfing, and as a matter of fact, I've got to share with you one of the funniest visions I ever had in my life, and I can still see it today. He was in a golf tournament, and he had this bad reputation for hitting people. He was in a foursome, probably with Arnold Palmer, or somebody like that at the Riviera, and got up to first tee off. I remember I was standing back off of the first tee, and they were announcing the players, and you look down the gallery and it's just tight. You can't imagine. Being a golfer myself, I can't imagine hitting a ball down that. And so they announce the golfers and then they announce President Ford to the tee, and I look down the gallery and the fairway, and the whole gallery just whewwww, just like the water opening.

Smith: The Red Sea parting

Wennekamp: It was beautiful.

Erik: Did he see it?

Wennekamp: Yeah, he did.

Smith: Non-verbal communication.

Wennekamp: Funniest thing I've ever seen.

Smith: What is it about the game of golf that you derive such pleasure from? I'm told that you empty your mind of anything else, so it's a form of mental relaxation.

Wennekamp: Yeah. It is truly an escape in such a beautiful environment. The combination of those two things, particularly like here. You go up and play golf at Palos Verdes, looking out over the ocean. I mean, it's just breathtaking and it's just so peaceful – if you don't let it get to you.

Smith: That's it. And yet at the same time, my sense is that he was a pretty competitive guy.

Wennekamp: Oh yeah. He got irritated with himself, as we were talking earlier.

Smith: A couple quick things. Autograph seekers must have been more or less constant wherever you go.

Wennekamp: Yeah.

Smith: And during this time, too, we had the rise of the commercial dealer. These were not all eight year old kids spontaneously wanting an autograph. How did he deal with those demands of celebrity?

Wennekamp: Pretty well. He wasn't really excited about it, but he would accommodate it. Most of the time it would be people sending in pictures that they happened to get of him, or of them in the picture with him, or them shaking his hand or something. When you're in the White House, the staff automatically takes care of that. If you meet him, that's logged, and its recorded and the whole thing. But as a former – you don't have that official photographer following you around and somebody taking notes. And so a lot of pictures would come in. But he was accommodating. He'd usually keep it to just a signature as opposed to a note or annotation or something.

Smith: You know what Ronald Reagan did to frustrate dealers was to personalize. Which when you stop to think about it, is pretty shrewd.

Wennekamp: Oh, yeah. To Jane...

Smith: Exactly. Most people have no idea that a former president would spend as much time as he did on such things. He would set aside an afternoon every week. Say it's Tuesday afternoon, and there's that long table in the conference room, and there would be two piles of stuff, one for her, and one for him. He

was her goad. He would say, “Now come on Mother,” so they would sit down and they would sign together. But he was the one imposing his discipline in terms of carrying out their responsibilities.

Wennekamp: Yeah, I can see that.

Smith: When they went to a restaurant – they must have had favorite restaurants – were they left alone?

Wennekamp: In the two communities, yes, generally speaking, they were just respected residents. It was quite nice in that regard. It really was. It’s visiting Ames, Iowa or someplace – for good reason, people would take advantage of the opportunity. But he respected their right, if you will.

Smith: It goes with the territory.

Wennekamp: Yeah, exactly.

Smith: Did he enjoy the campus visits? He did a lot of them, didn’t he?

Wennekamp: Oh, my gosh. He really did.

Smith: People talked about commercializing the presidency – some things were left out of that discussion, one was the charity work that he did; three things, really. The second was all of the campus visits that he did, and third, which apparently was one of the things that brought he and Jimmy Carter together, comparing notes the fact that they had to raise all this money to build their presidential libraries - and to Gerald Ford, nine million dollars or whatever it was, was Mt. Everest.

Wennekamp: Yeah, it really, truly was. But you’re right. The academic experience was exciting and interesting, for everybody. For him, he loved it. He loved going in and teaching a law class or a political science class or just a lecture, doing a Q&A. He just thrived on it. And with the American Enterprise Institute, putting that together and supporting that, he just absolutely thrived on it. I remember when he was at UCLA, the mixture of events. He taught for a couple of days and then went over and played the Glenn Campbell Open, and then came back and did some more teaching, and then we flew out on the

Friday night after a reception with the trustees, and flew to Florida and did the Jackie Gleason. It was just – the mixture.

Smith: How I would have loved to see he and Gleason together. Did they hit it off?

Wennekamp: Yeah. Gleason was a piece of work.

Smith: Was he? How so?

Wennekamp: The way he'd play golf. He would be in this cart, and he'd hit the ball and get in his cart – no practice swings or anything – drive up the cart, get out, click, get back in the cart.

Smith: It was not an exercise in exercise.

Wennekamp: No.

Smith: Who were his friends? Who were the people that President Ford really enjoyed being around?

Wennekamp: Oh, my gosh.

Smith: The thing with Hope was real. They were genuinely buddies.

Wennekamp: Yeah. To my surprise, because President Ford is such a real honest guy and Bob Hope was not so real and honest.

Smith: I think I know exactly what you are saying. To know him was not necessarily to buy the public image.

Wennekamp: But people like Firestone, I think, a true friend. And then he had friends in Vail. No one comes to mind, really. Not that I recall.

Smith: And the corporate boards, was it exaggerated the number of boards that he was on, or were they sort of rotated over time? Were there things that he did for many, many years?

Wennekamp: He tried to maintain those for many, many years. And like I said, even though it was reported as a lot of boards, he was selective and he played a role I'll never forget the fact that when I talked to representatives at the corporations, like American Express or something, they, to a board, were always amazed at

how prepared he was. You get the board books – I’m on a board and I have trouble getting ready for the board meeting – getting through the board book. But he was always prepared and had input, he wasn’t there just for the monetary ride, if you will. Or the exposure. He took great pride in those responsibilities.

Smith: That dovetails with what we’ve been told by a number of other people. Do you think he was sensitive to the charge that he was cashing in?

Wennekamp: Not too. I don’t think he was too sensitive to it because he knew that he was contributing, that he wasn’t just prostituting himself, if you will. And the fact that people didn’t understand, he’d just say, “Well, that’s their problem.”

Smith: And obviously people had no idea of all the things that he turned down.

Wennekamp: No, that’s right, oh absolutely.

Smith: When was the last time you saw him?

Wennekamp: The last time I spoke with him would have been probably the spring of ’06 when I was down there working on the plans for his possible demise. I had responsibility for everything that took place here in California, prior to going back to the cathedral. That was the last time I spoke with him. And he was doing fine.

Smith: He was?

Wennekamp: Yeah. He had aged, but he was still the same guy.

Smith: There is a wonderful story one of the agents told us, I guess it was the last time that he came out of the hospital. He got in the car and the agents were going to drive home, and he said, “No, we’re going to In and Out Burger.” And not only did he insist they were going to In and Out Burger - they park there, he gets out of the car and he goes and stands in line to get his In and Out Burger.

Wennekamp: But, it’s like he loved to drive people crazy because people over at Eisenhower Medical Center, they went to great pains to have code names and numbers and everything. So after the President came over, they’d basically

slip him in the side door, have a different name so they don't have to register, announce and have the media pick up on the fact that he'd checked in. But what would President Ford do? With all these plans, he'd grab Secret Service, "Let's go over to the hospital," and he'd walk right in the front door and everybody would see him. He knew what he was doing. He was playing with people.

Smith: Was it frustrating to have, in effect, a death watch going on? Anytime he was in the hospital. My sense was that Mrs. Ford, and he both valued their privacy. But in some ways that's almost naïve. You can say I'm no long President of the United States, but the fact is, you once were President of the United States.

Wennekamp: I think the family probably handled that very well in curbing that feeding frenzy of the media, when he'd go into the hospital – Walter Reed or whatever – and just basically maintain a radio silence, just say no comment; as opposed to playing it up. When it got toward the end, it was difficult because there was a death watch and there were people trying to rent houses in the gated community that's right over the wall, so that they could put their satellites up on the roofs and stuff like that. But the community there handled it. Law enforcement, in coordination with Secret Service, really did a great job, just a phenomenal job.

Smith: Were you surprised at all by the degree of public response when he did die, because he'd been out of the public eye for a while? Whether it was here, out at St. Margaret's where people would line up by the thousands, or back east. You'd expect it in Grand Rapids, but not necessarily on New Year's weekend in Washington, DC.

Wennekamp: Oh, I know. I was truly taken aback, not only from the tributes and the accolades and the positive response that you heard over the airwaves, but like you said, the people that came out. The public repose that went on all night. I'll never forget; I went over about three in the morning to see what the experience was like for the people that had gone to Indian Wells to park to get the bus to come down to the church, go through the sanctuary. Two things,

one I'll share with you real quickly was in planning, it's like doing advance work on a party you hope you never have. And you're taking it from zero.

And so I didn't know what to anticipate relative to the necessity of ushers, controlling people and the public repose – putting ropes and stanchions up to keep the pews closed so people wouldn't sit down and linger, etc. I was truly amazed. People were so respectful. I hardly needed anyone. Just show them the way and people came in. I went over there at three in the morning and everybody was smiling and saying, "Nah, it's no problem. It took us about three hours to park and get over here. But no problem." And one couple came through with their about nine year old son. He's dressed in his coat and tie at four in the morning. Just beautiful. The respect and admiration was just phenomenal.

Smith: How do you think he should be remembered? More appropriately, how do you remember him?

Wennekamp: No, I think your first question is probably the same. But for me, what he was able to do in coming in and healing a nation. I was very, very fortunate to find myself in DC at that point in our history, and to see what was happening and be part of that, if you will. But to see how effectively he took the reins and guided the country in such a way, so obviously not for his own personal gain, and what he was able to accomplish, I think was just phenomenal. To bring us back from the depths of where we were in '74, to where we found ourselves in '76, was just phenomenal. I don't think he gets nearly the credit that he should, and he did it only because of the kind of guy, the kind of person, the kind of man that he was.

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