

Gerald R. Ford Oral History Project
Vern Ehlers
Interviewed by
Richard Norton Smith
July 21, 2010

Smith: Thank you very much for doing this. The obvious question at the beginning is how did your paths first cross with Gerald Ford?

Ehlers: I really don't know except that I recall once getting on an airplane here in Washington. I was here for a physics meeting, got on the plane, and he was sitting up in first class reading the newspaper. I just introduced myself to him and he said, "Hello," and was very polite. And just to show how impressive he was at remembering names and people, the next time I saw him, I don't even remember where it was, he got that puzzled look on his face and a few light bulbs went on, and he in fact made the comment something about, "Ah, Professor Ehlers!" And that's impressive given all the people he meets.

Smith: The mark of a good congressman?

Ehlers: Yes, he was much better at remembering names than I was.

Smith: You came into politics through a very unconventional route.

Ehlers: Yes.

Smith: Tell us a little bit about that.

Ehlers: Well, I'm a nuclear physicist by training and never intended to get involved in politics. I had been teaching at Berkeley, had received my Ph.D. there, and was asked to stay on the faculty. So I taught and did research at Berkeley for six years after the Ph.D. Then Calvin College – an excellent, excellent liberal arts college in Grand Rapids, Michigan, and my alma mater - asked me several times if I would come and help them build a physics department and teach at Calvin. And I said 'no' several times, but my conscience started bothering me, so I finally decided to do it.

We moved to Grand Rapids in 1966. It's all kind of complicated and even a little hazy in my head at this point, but that was at a time of great national

distress due to the Vietnam War - I was at Berkeley - so of course, I watched all the related student activity. I was not involved in demonstrations, but I interacted with students and faculty and watched carefully. I'm a good watcher. And I watched what was going on and who was doing what, saying what, and how it was going. Initially, it started through this very idealistic effort to change policy of the nation, but it turned violent after a few years, by the time I left. I went back for three summers to do research after I'd moved to Michigan, and each summer was progressively more violent, even to the point of a student getting shot by a National Guardsman. This was before the Kent State event. It was not a fatal shot, but it was a remarkable step of course.

Smith: Do you find it difficult to communicate to people today who weren't there just how intense, even violent, the political feelings had become, not only on campus but in the broader culture?

Ehlers: The difficulty is most people don't even know it happened. Today, when you talk to them, they're just astounded. And when we'd moved to Grand Rapids, there'd been race riots there just a few weeks before we arrived. Compared to Berkeley, it was small scale stuff, but still pretty serious for the city Grand Rapids was. My wife and I are both devout Christians and we went searching for a church and we chose one, particularly because it was only two blocks from where the race riots were. We thought maybe we could be of some help to that community, plus we had some friends who already belonged to that church, people I had known from Calvin. Even though we had ended up at Berkeley and they had ended up at Columbia University, we ended up back at Calvin.

So my wife and I decided to join Eastern Avenue Christian Reformed Church and that suddenly put me in the midst of the maelstrom because the church was trying to be a positive force in the community. We started Baxter Community Center - I'm sure you're familiar with that - which was a big factor in stabilizing the community there. We started Project Conserve which was to restore housing, and that became the Inner City Christian Federation, which rebuilt hundreds of decaying homes in the inner city. They rented them

or sold them. I was teaching courses on how to maintain and insulate your house, and it turned into sort of a Habitat for Humanity before Habitat for Humanity was around. I was active in helping that get started. And later, it became ICCF, but also had a portion for humanity of development. We had two programs going.

Smith: One of the themes of this project is to examine the culture of West Michigan and the environment that produced Ford and that elected him over and over again. We've heard wonderful stories of the influence of the Christian Reformed Church – how for years people would buy a Sunday paper on Saturday night, but they wouldn't read it until Monday. How has it changed and how has it not changed?

Ehlers: It has changed considerably in terms of participation in the political arena. I was one of the first. There had been some others from the Christian Reformed Church who had served publically, but they were not considered leaders in the Dutch or Christian Reformed community. I wasn't either when I started, but as I said, I came into our church, and later our church formed a social justice committee and I was asked to chair that. That immediately put me in touch with a lot of other churches in the city, non-Christian Reformed, that were doing the same thing. Denny Hoekstra and his wife Jeni went to the same church. Both of them are masters at localizing a community, so we worked with them and became close friends with them. Also, Howard Rienstra, who would later become a city commissioner, is also a faculty member at Calvin and many of the Grand Rapids activists were at Calvin College.

Smith: This flies in the face of the stereotype of West Michigan, and particularly the Dutch community, as an inherently conservative group.

Ehlers: My mother was very upset when I got involved politically. She sort of justified it when I got elected to the county commission. She justified that as long as I was still teaching at Calvin and part-time in politics, that was okay, because - in paraphrasing what she said - any damage done to me in the county building by my colleagues there was undone by my going back to Calvin College to teach the same day.

Smith: So, it was less an ideological aversion than a cultural rejection of political involvement?

Ehlers: Yes, I would say it's certainly more the latter. And my mother never really fully adjusted to the fact that I was politically involved. Whereas my dad, who was a pastor in the Christian Reformed Church, was quite proud of it. He thought that was the right thing to do. In fact, it's kind of funny because my sister liked to prod my dad occasionally and when he retired, he moved to Ohio where my sister was. He became active in the United Way, treasurer of the local United Way and things like that. One day, he was sitting at the kitchen table counting money and so forth and my sister walked in and says, "Dad, you're going to the dogs. You used to preach against the Boy Scouts and now you're collecting money for them," which sort of epitomized the change. But in my case, I didn't have any of the hang-ups.

I had been at Berkeley and I had seen that side of the world and their reaction. But my friends and I, you know, the Hoekstras and Rienstras and so forth, recognized that a good deal of the problem with Grand Rapids was a lack of good leadership in the city commission, so that's where we started. At least, that's where Rienstra and I went on the County Commission. We were working through different channels, but always with the same objective. We simply decided we needed better leadership and so we would try to pick the person who was running for the city commission who showed the greatest understanding and the greatest promise of doing something and we would help that person get elected. We basically became a machine without even trying to be.

Smith: Imagine: a good government machine.

Ehlers: A good government, idealistic in approach, and you know, you've been in politics, you know how hard it is to get volunteers to help. You drag them in kicking and screaming to get them to write and put stamps on letters and all that stuff. Howard Rienstra and Jeni, Denny Hoekstra and I, along with Norm DeGraaf, who was a forward looking insurance salesman, we just put this little machine together and we'd pick who the best candidate was, go to that candidate, and knock on that door and say, "We think you're the best. We'd

like to help you.” To have volunteers, experienced volunteers, appear out of the gloom and say, “We’re here to help you” had a major impact. But also, it grew in the sense that, if we felt none of the people running were good, we’d go out and recruit someone. We recruited Lyman Parks, who was the first African-American on the Grand Rapids city commission. We recruited him to run for city commissioner and he was more than willing to do it. He later became the first black Mayor in Grand Rapids.

Smith: It’s interesting because, as you talk about this project, I’m thinking back to a precursor of sorts, back when President Ford’s dad and others were trying to overthrow Frank McKay and bring decent government back to Grand Rapids. So, in some ways, history repeats itself.

Ehlers: Well, that’s very true. The differences, of course, that McKay, whether it was true or not, had the reputation of being a shady character. Not just McKay, but all the people he surrounded himself with. In our case, we were trying to change government to recognize the needs of society, particularly the poor people.

Smith: In some ways, it’s a tougher thing to do.

Ehlers: Yes, it was, particularly in the shadow of the race riots, which shocked the people of Grand Rapids. They couldn’t imagine.

Smith: ‘It can’t happen here.’

Ehlers: Yeah. So, anyway, that’s how I got involved, never, never intending to run myself. I learned enough about politics and what people look for in a candidate. You know, a strong chin is worth two points, the right nose is worth one point, and so forth.

Smith: Hair helps.

Ehlers: It does. I learned early on that an unattractive, bald-headed man like me doesn’t have a chance, but that’s not why I decided I wasn’t interested in running. I just wasn’t interested in the job. I was interested in changing society, but not doing all the grunt work for any political office.

Smith: When did you first run?

Ehlers: In 1974, I ran for the county commission and the reason I was persuaded to, I had become active in the environmental movement. You're familiar with the West Michigan Environmental Action Council, which I think is still one of the best in the country. We started that about '68 and I was in on the ground floor. I was not a key player in that at all, I just thought it was a great idea. I had become very aware of the environmental problems and Michigan had the right atmosphere to make changes, so I joined the West Michigan Environmental Action Council. In fact, fairly quickly I ended up on the board of that organization. So, when we had a terrible solid waste problem and Kent County opened dumps with leachate flowing into the rivers and creeks and saw headlines in the paper every day, friends said, "Look, Vern, you're a scientist, you're an environmentalist, you're the guy to deal with this."

So I ran for county commission. It was a thankless job. The county commission was still the good old boys club, very much so, and literally with the emphasis on boys. There was not a single woman in twenty-one people. I still remember in my first month there, after a county commission meeting, I was looking around, chatting with some of my fellow commissioners and said, "You know, this is awful. It's all men. I'm going to go out and recruit some women to run." And a member of the county commission said, "Ah, the last thing we need is a bunch of pushy broads in this outfit." The press reporter was standing right next to him and he didn't even report the story. I asked the reporter afterwards, I said, "You heard what he said?" He said, "Oh yeah." I said, "I thought that'd be a big story." He said, "Well, no, everyone in the city knows what he's like." I said, "So, if I had said it, it'd be a story?" "Oh, yeah." I said, "You have a different standard of news than he does."

But, at any rate, in the meantime, I had met Jerry Ford and then I met him again and as I said, he remembered my background. The next time I met him, he knew my name. He was incredible on names. And I remember times when I was walking down the streets of Grand Rapids with him and it was a real revelation to me that I knew scarcely any of the people walking down the street and he knew them all and called them by name. I remember one time,

we walked in what was the Pantlind Hotel before the remodeling and I was with him. By then, he was presidential rank. I think he was vice president. We walked in together, Secret Service and all, and he was shaking hands with people and mostly calling them by name and I noticed an African-American man lurking in the background kind of off to the side. It was clear he wanted to meet Jerry Ford. So I tapped Jerry on the shoulder and said, "Jerry, I think that gentleman over there wants to talk to you." He looked at him and said, "Oh, yeah, I got to say 'hi' to him." So, he walks over and says 'hi' to him and says, "How's your mother? Is the cancer gone or is it still progressing?" And I thought, just what an amazing guy. Here's a guy one step from the presidency of the United States and he remembers his roots, he remembers the illness in the family of that man.

Smith: I remember hearing him tell later on, not to pick on any one in particular, but he sort of used Guy Vander Jagt as an example of someone who was enormously talented yet, in some ways, forgot his roots. Clearly, Ford never really had a seriously contested race after his first one and it's amazing how much time he spent in the district, even after becoming a national figure. He used to say that he thought things had gone downhill since the staffs had expanded. Part of that was his fiscal conservatism, but I think part of that was also a sense that maybe they didn't simply reflect, but in some ways contributed, to the pell-mell growth of government.

Ehlers: Yes.

Smith: Did you talk to him about the House and housekeeping issues when you were first elected? Did you have any conversations?

Ehlers: Not really. Well, when I was first elected to the county commission, he complimented me. In fact, I played somewhat of a role in the county contribution of the Ford Museum and it was like pulling teeth to get money out of the county commission, which normally never appropriated money. Their job was just to keep the county running, so to give money to something like the Ford Museum was a real change. One time, Jerry and I were there looking around. I think by then I probably had become chairman of the

Not Released

Smith: I was going to ask you. From time to time, we ask people, did you ever see the temper? Because it existed and he spent a lifetime controlling it.

Ehlers: No, I never saw him lose his temper, but clearly he was angry in that instance. The one time I saw him *really* angry, and it tells you a lot about what kind of a man he was, was at the time of Watergate. I have to tell you an interlude here. I went up to the University of Colorado at Boulder for a year on sabbatical and did research on atomic and nuclear physics. It was a great year. And, while I was there, I went to the national meeting of the American Physical Society, which was the physicists' association. A speaker was Congressman McDermott from Washington, who was a chemist and worked at the Hanford facility, and he said, "All of you should get out there and get in touch with your member of Congress. A lot of scientific issues come up in Congress and most of them know nothing about science. See if you can offer to help them."

I thought, "Good idea", so I got back to Boulder and sat down and wrote a letter to Mr. Ford to suggest that, if he was interested, I would put together a group of scientists from West Michigan and we would be happy to meet with him and advise him on science matters. I dropped it in the mail and my thought was that I would get one of these thank-you-for-your-letter type of letters in response that said 'We'll keep it in mind'. And, instead, two days later, I get a call from Mr. Meyer, Jerry's Chief of Staff. He called me and said, "Hey, got your letter and Jerry really thinks it's a great idea and he'd like to have you put that together." And I said, "Good. I'll be in Washington in three weeks for a science meeting. I'd be happy to meet with him."

So, I came and met with him and it was interesting. It was in what now is the Speaker's office under Madam Pelosi with a beautiful view down the mall between the monuments and so forth. It was pretty heady stuff for a punk scientist from Grand Rapids. At any rate, I had a series of questions. How did he want it run? Who did he want on it? Et cetera, et cetera. It was very interesting because I posed the question "Do you want me to restrict it to Republicans who are scientists?" And Frank Meyer immediately spoke up and says, "Of course we would want that." And Jerry took a puff on his pipe and said, "Well, I don't see why. We want scientific advice, not political advice." And so that gave me a clear signal of how he operated. So, we scientists would get together with Jerry about four times a year. He'd come to town and I would set up a meeting. We had about five or six scientists. I'd prepare an agenda ahead of time, so the scientists would be able to get some background on it and we advised Jerry. That's what led to my getting politically involved on the national level.

Smith: Did he ask questions?

Ehlers: Oh, yes, lots of questions, good questions. The only time we really had a disagreement was when he was gung-ho to build the supersonic airplane and we all advised him against it. We said the cost was going to exceed the benefits and the program wouldn't fly, literally.

Smith: Did you ever have a chance to remind him of that in later years?

Ehlers: I think I did at one point. He still fought the battle, but he lost the battle in the Congress, though not because of anything we did. I remember clearly one thing which gave me some real insight into how Congress works, but I never fully appreciated how true it was until I got here myself. I talked once after one of our science meetings and said, "You know, Mr. Ford pardon me for asking this, but I'm a little puzzled because, here you are, an extremely busy congressman; you come back on the weekend; you meet with constituents; and then you come meet with us and spend an hour and a half or two hours with us and you seem to enjoy it. That's really surprising to me because you're so busy. How do you find the time for it, first of all, and why do you enjoy it?" And Jerry was a pretty big guy, he puts his arm around me and

says, "Well, Vern, you've got to recognize one thing. You're the only people I meet with who meet with me for the purpose of giving me something instead of asking me for something." He says, "All day long, I sit in that office and people come in and ask me for favors and you come along and you're here to help me." He said, "That's great. I really enjoy it." And he did, he really did enjoy meeting with us, partly because he didn't understand science and we were able to explain these issues in very simple terms.

Smith: That raises a great question. Tell me about, for lack of a better word, his intelligence, his mind.

Ehlers: Well, I had heard all the stories, too. He was very slow of speech, slow to react, and that, I think, was what killed him in that one debate where he said he'd got himself in a little box and instead of realizing how bad the box was, he just kept plowing.

Smith: Plus he was stubborn.

Ehlers: Stubbornness, too, perhaps. But he was a thoughtful guy and much, much brighter than his constituents realized and certainly much brighter than the press corps realized. I found him to be very bright, very astute.

Smith: But it's interesting, the curiosity factor strikes me. A subject that he didn't know a lot about and he wanted to know more about it.

Ehlers: Right and it was very good, but it was also very practical and pragmatic. For example, I got a call from him one day. He said, "Vern, I don't know what to do. We've got a bill coming up" on banning open pit mining for coal or something related to the mining of coal. And he said, "Vern, I have a telegram from Detroit Edison and they say if this bill passes, they're going to increase the cost of electricity in Michigan by x percent." It was a pretty sizeable percent. He said, "Is that really true or not?" and I said, "I don't know anything about it, but I'll see what I can find out."

I knew it was a big controversy in Montana at the time, so I called some of the people involved in it in Montana and asked a bunch of questions. Pretty soon, I was talking to people all over the country about it. I put together a position

paper for him and he appreciated that. But a lot of the questions were something that our committee couldn't answer right off. We had to do some research. The one thing that happened that really gave me some insight into his character because, as you know, he didn't use profanity, not unless he was really angry.

Smith: The worst thing was a "God damn it". Penny (Circle) says once in a while you could tell this was going to be a "God damn it day," but that was it.

Ehlers: At the end of one of our science meetings, we were all pretty curious about Watergate and what he knew and so forth. So, he told us what he knew. I think it was John Mitchell that he was angry at, but he made the comment about him, and then he got angry, just pounded the table. He said, "I was standing this far away from John Mitchell and he looked me right in the eye and he lied to me. That damn guy lied to me." He was just so shook up that anyone would lie to him at that level of government. I think he was ready to kick Dick Nixon out right then.

Smith: That's an admirable character trait that you just described, and yet there are people in this town who would say, "Well, how naïve can you be?"

Ehlers: Yes.

Smith: That's the Boy Scout.

Ehlers: Yeah, he tended to believe people. If they told him something, that was it.

Smith: Did you ever debate the pardon with him or discuss it?

Ehlers: Yes and no. I never brought it up with him. He brought it up with me a few times and not just with me, sometimes it was a group of people. But he said repetitively he had absolutely no regrets about having given the pardon. He saw no other way of bringing the nation back together and getting on with business than to do that. And he told me very directly that he knew that very likely that would be the end of his presidency. Now, that may have been easier to say after the fact, but I really think he looked at that. I think what really bothered him a great deal was when terHorst resigned. They had a lot of respect for each other and I don't quite know why terHorst resigned unless

he was just peeved that Jerry did it without telling him, so he was totally unprepared when the media called.

Smith: Well, Ford's explanation was, first of all, he didn't want to put terHorst in a position where he was lying to the press by denying it before it happened and he certainly didn't want people to know about it before it happened. Mel Laird, characteristically, talks about how he had a plan - he was going to bring a bipartisan delegation from both Houses down to the White House to ask the President to do this. The problem with that is, given the supercharged political climate of that time, could you really have floated a trial balloon without it being shot down?

Ehlers: No.

Smith: I once spent two and a half hours in a hotel in Grand Rapids war-gaming it with the President. I went in a skeptic and I came out convinced that really there wasn't another way to do it. There's no easy way. There's no politically safe way to do it. And the other side of this story, of course, because it never happened is, what would it have been like for the Ford presidency had he not pardoned Nixon and the country for the next two and a half years had remained preoccupied by Richard Nixon's legal status? I mean, you can say that it cost him the presidency. It probably did. But if he hadn't done it, it might have also have cost the presidency.

Ehlers: Yes, you're right. I think the only thing he could've done which might've put a better cast on it entirely would be to announce it and at the same time announce he was not going to run for reelection. But that might also not be the best thing for the country by the time the election came around. Who would know who would be running, et cetera.

Smith: He always remained a true fiscal conservative.

Ehlers: Yes, except where his allowance was concerned.

Smith: The exclusive trade union, as Herbert Hoover once called it, of former presidents - whenever they needed anything, they went to Jerry because Jerry had friends.

Ehlers: The funny thing is, as time went on and his friends disappeared, he called me more often when they were in danger of losing or having a reduction in the funds allocated for Presidential retirees. One time he called me, and he was very concerned, "I may have to let two people go in my office," he says. "I can manage okay but 100,000 people a year will write wanting a letter from me and they won't get a response." He said, "You do what you want, but that's the fact."

Smith: Once you were in Congress, when you got together, what sort of things did you talk about? Was it current events? He made a real effort to stay very much on top of things, to be as contemporary as possible.

Ehlers:

Not Released

Smith: The statue looks spectacular. The pictures are wonderful.

Ehlers: It's very good.

Smith: I can't imagine any honor that would've pleased him more than that. He really regarded this as his home.

Ehlers:

Not Released

- Smith: You were also instrumental, I believe, in seeing that the Congressional Gold Medal went to both the Fords.
- Ehlers: Yes, that was my own project out of necessity because you need, I think, two-thirds of the members of the House to personally sign the bill, and I couldn't just contact their office and have someone fake a signature. They had to personally sign it. Then I had to personally go around and ask for their signature. That's just the way it is. They just don't want people willy-nilly giving away gold medals, although, lately I don't think the standards have been as high. But I remember very clearly the little buttons that said "Vote for Betty's Husband" and I said, "There's no way I'm going to leave Betty out." There's been some criticism of me for that.
- Smith: Really?
- Ehlers: Yes.
- Smith: Of including the two of them?
- Ehlers: Yes, because we've never done that for a president's wife before. This sort of thing.
- Smith: People have forgotten a lot of history.
- Ehlers: I just said, "That's the way it's going to be." And I got the signatures and we did it.
- Smith: It was a wonderful event, a great event.
- Ehlers: Yeah, it was. Thanks, especially, for the speech you wrote for me. I think that's the only time I've ever used a speech someone else had written.
- Smith: I'm glad it went well.
- Ehlers: It was very good and there are some tough critics around here. Remember Hal Rogers, who likes to play the role of the grumpy southerner? He came up to me afterwards and said, "Vern, I never thought that you had it in you. That was a superb ceremony and an absolutely superb speech." And I said, "I wish I could take credit for it. It's the first speech in my life I've ever read."

Smith: Well, you did a great job. Everyone did. It was nice of President Clinton to be there. Again, like the funeral later on, sometimes the official trappings can almost drown out the personal element. There, it was the opposite. I mean, it was a grand setting and a great occasion of state, but it felt like a family event.

Ehlers: Yes, and everyone loved Jerry. I recall several years after that, he came around, and I think it was his last visit to the Capitol. I got word, I don't even remember how I got it, but with about ten minutes warning that Jerry wants to walk across the floor of the House. That's where he started. So, I said, "Okay, I'll meet him in the cloak room and I'll take him around." So, he showed up. He first had to kiss Helen, who ran the little food concession and have a picture taken with her. I think it's still hanging there. I was asked to try to get him through quickly, so I brought him through the cloak room to the floor of the House, and the word had spread a little bit that Jerry might be coming in, but then someone spotted him and started applauding. That's the first time I've ever seen the floor of the House stop business totally for

Not Released

Smith: I assume he saw as many Democrats as Republicans.

Ehlers: Yes. It was a great time and they all just applauded until he walked out the other side of the chamber. Continuous applause and, actually, it's one of the few times I've seen members of Congress fighting to get in line to shake someone's hand.

Smith: That's great. Was that the last time you saw him?

Ehlers: No, I saw him in Michigan a few times after that, but I think that was his last visit to Washington. Then, I found out interesting things, too. Todd Plaats came over to me, he's a Representative from Pennsylvania, a young man, good guy, he came up to me and said, "Vern, thanks so much for bringing him here. Do you realize Jerry Ford is my hero? I wouldn't be in Congress if it weren't for Jerry Ford." I said, "How'd that happen?" He said, "Well, when

he ran for president, we had a teacher who wanted us to be interested in the election, so he let us pick our candidates and then he would choose someone to be the candidate and then others to work on the campaign. I was Jerry Ford's campaign manager in my 7th grade class. Boy, I worked so hard on that and I was so brokenhearted when he lost, but he's been a hero to me." So, the next week I went home (I go home every weekend), and I went to the Ford Museum and bought one of those blankets they have that said Gerald Ford and brought it back and gave it to Todd. He was crying when he originally told me about his grade school Ford campaign, and when I gave him the blanket he started crying again and said, "Vern, this means so much to me." It's still hanging in his office.

Smith: That's great. You know, people get so cynical about this place and they assume everyone in it is cynical.

Ehlers: Actually the level of cynicism here is very low. It's certainly lower than the public at large. And it's not a good old boys club, either, anymore. I think it used to be.

Smith: I know he was appalled at campaign spending, what it cost to run for office. Did you and he ever have that conversation?

Ehlers: No, not really. I was aware of his feelings. I think he was upset about various things. Upset is not really the right word, but a little bit concerned. When I was elected, he talked to me and I still remember clearly one of the things he asked because I wasn't sure what he meant. He said, "Vern, where are you going to live?" And I said, "We've got a nice house here. We'll continue living in this house." He shook his head and said, "When I was elected, we backed a moving van up to the house, loaded up everything we owned, drove to Washington, bought a house and lived there. I only came home twice a year at first, for the August recess and the Christmas recess." He said, "It's so different now." I said, "Yes, I get to come home every weekend." And I've used that story many times in speeches because I'm constantly asked about the civility or lack of civility and I used to say, "Some of our lack of civility is because we never are together on weekends, because almost all of the Members go home on weekends. At the state level, it's because of the

freeway system so everyone drives home. Same in the state legislature. In Washington, it's because of the jet airplane."

Smith: Absolutely. Alan Greenspan told us the same thing. We asked him once about what had contributed to the problem and he volunteered that the leading cause was the jet plane.

Ehlers: In fact, I have constituents who've been angry at me because I won't come home on a Wednesday night to give a speech. And I said, "I'm sorry, I come home every weekend. I'd be happy to give a speech then, but during the week, I'm supposed to be in Washington voting." "Oh, they won't care if you miss one bill!" But the people do mind!

Smith: You've spoiled your constituents.

Ehlers: Right.

Smith: I think you were the one who told the story, a wonderful story...the first day when President Ford began living in the White House, as opposed to being out there in Alexandria where he lived and commuted to DC, he went up to the door of the West Wing and there was a Marine there who saluted. And the President sticks his hand out and says, "Hi, I'm Jerry Ford. I'm going to be living here. What's your name?" Again, that's the Congressman, isn't it?

Ehlers: Yes, and I did tell you that story. The person I got it from is no longer alive, so we have to trust my memory.

Smith: I trust you.

Ehlers: But it was Maury De Jonge from the *Grand Rapids Press* and Maury was in his glory, of course, because he always had a close relationship with Jerry and always treated them well, too, which is another factor. So, Maury got invited to all the events when Ford took over. And Maury was walking behind Jerry Ford when that happened. The real *coup de gras*, maybe you didn't hear of this, was when Maury went and talked to the Marine afterwards and said, "What did you think of that?" He said, "I thought that was great. I've been standing here and opening the door for the President for over a year and

President Nixon never even once looked at me.” Maury made a little story of what a difference that was between Nixon and Ford.

Smith: Were you surprised by the amount of public reaction when he passed away? He’d been out of the public eye for a while.

Ehlers: No, by then, I think the general public had put in perspective his pardoning of Nixon. And I think they had recognized, not as totally as you and I have, but recognized that it really was for the good of the country. They didn’t quite believe that Ford did it knowing that it would likely cost him the presidency. Ford had said it often enough. Who’s the old guy on NPR?

Smith: Daniel Shorr.

Ehlers:

Not Released

Smith: Last question - I realize it’s totally speculative. The way the party has changed, could Jerry Ford get nominated in the Republican primary in West Michigan today?

Ehlers: Yes, easily. I think what he stood for is still what most of the people in West Michigan stand for. It’s what I stand for and I’ve gotten elected quite handily close to ten times. I get compared to Jerry quite a bit, not so much back home, but around here I do.

Smith: Really?

Ehlers: Yes.

Smith: And I’m sure it’s a complimentary reference.

Ehlers: Yeah, and not so much in the way that I could be president or anything like that. It's just that what I stand for is what Jerry stood for. Honesty, integrity, not being willing to play the games that get played around here. People still remember that about Jerry. Some of them almost implied that I act the way I do because I'm trying to imitate Jerry.

Smith: Maybe that tells you something about West Michigan.

Ehlers: Yes. Well, it's the values of West Michigan and it's a great place to live. I was very proud to represent them and I'd be very happy to represent them for another twenty years. A different story. This may sound funny to you, but when I got to the State House and I saw some of these old men doddering around and being generally fairly useless in the legislative process, they were the old timers. They knew all the good stories and so forth, but just not making contributions anymore. I remember saying, "Lord, please give me the wisdom to quit before I get that way." Now, that was at the State House and then I found the same thing at the state Senate and also here. People staying too long. I may have quit too early. I don't know. From that standpoint, I think I easily could've gone another two or four years and still been very productive.

Smith: I suppose, in retrospect, is it better to quit too early than too late?

Ehlers:

Not Released

Smith: Will you miss it?

Ehlers: Yes, I will miss being at the center of action. I will miss being able to say, "I think we should do this" and start working towards that. Now, I still have that opportunity because I've been approached by enough organizations and people who want me to continue doing things like that, but I also don't want

to be a hanger-on and I don't want to be a lobbyist. In fact, a reporter, when I announced that I was not running again, said, "Are you going to be a lobbyist?" I said, "Nope. Well, let me correct that. I may be a lobbyist, but I won't charge anything for it."

Smith: That's a novel approach.

Ehlers: I said, "It may be a little hard for me to keep my mouth shut when things need to be said and I'm not above talking to colleagues about what I think they should do, but I don't want to get paid for it."

Smith: This has been wonderful. I can't thank you enough.

INDEX

C

Christian Reformed Church, 3-4

D

Dutch influence, 3-4

F

Ford, Betty

 Congressional Gold Medal, 14-15

Ford, Gerald R.

 Congressional days, 8-11

 Congressional Gold Medal, 14-15

 early years, 5-6

 first acquaintance with, 1

 funeral, reactions to, 18-19

 Nixon pardon, 12-13

 personal stories about, 7-8, 18

 remembrance, 16-17

 temper, 8-9