A First For First Families

In April an extraordinary group met at the Museum to reflect upon their lives as members of America's most visible household. The two day forum titled, Modern First Ladies: Private Lives and Public Duties was cosponsored by the Gerald R. Ford Foundation and the Ford Library and Museum.

Betty Ford, who organized the forum, invited Mrs. Reagan and all former First Ladies and their daughters to Grand Rapids. Her invitation was accepted by Rosalynn Carter, Susan Ford Vance, Lynda Johnson Robb, Luci Johnson Turpin, and Eleanor Seagraves, oldest grandchild of Franklin and Eleanor Roosevelt. Lady Bird Johnson and Margaret Truman Daniel also accepted but illness prevented their attending.

Speaking to an overflow and often rapt audience, first family members recalled times both joyous and painful. There were dark and shared memories of assassination fears, the Vietnam war, and a sometimes intrusive press, but lighter moments were vividly remembered too. There was genuine affection for the White House and an appreciation for the high excitement of living at 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue.

Earlier, Mrs. Carter and Mrs. Ford talked about the First Lady as advocate and presidential confidant. The modern First Lady, they agreed, had become an independent public spokesperson and an important figure in her own right. I guess rightly or wrongly, I see the First Lady as a role model for the American woman, Betty Ford noted. In a separate session conferees Diane Sawyer, Elizabeth Carpenter, and Mary Hoyt convened to discuss the impact of the press on the First Lady over the past twenty years. Carpenter was press secretary to Lady Bird Johnson and Hoyt held the same position with Rosalynn Carter.

The keynote address was delivered by Lewis Gould, chairman of the department of history at the University of Texas in Austin. Gould also served as a moderator. In his opening remarks he said, in part: Historians have understandably treated the presidency as a man's locker room. There is some truth in that perspective, but also much distortion. By ignoring First Ladies, we have truncated the humanity of presidents and diminished them as men. Our grasp of the presidency is poorer for that action.

The unqualified success of this "first" conference has prompted Mrs. Ford to suggest gathering periodically to continue the work of our first formal group effort to give definition to a job which does not have a job description.
First Ladies Conference

The evening before the start of the Conference, several hundred guests joined Betty Ford and daughter Susan at a reception and exhibit preview. Devoted to the interests and achievements of First Ladies from Lou Hoover to Nancy Reagan, the new exhibit will be at the Museum until the end of the year.

I know for myself there's no friction between us. I feel and I think you expressed the same thing. There is a sororityship once you lived in the White House. — Betty Ford to Rosalynn Carter

I used to say "Jimmy I need more staff" and he'd say "Everybody in the White House needs more staff." — Rosalynn Carter

I did not want my husband to become president. It was a very difficult time for our kids and us. We had no control over it. — Betty Ford
She [grandmother Eleanor Roosevelt] always did the work that came to her to do. She did not search out work. A lot of things came to her from people who needed help. — Eleanor Seagraves

In my family we have an expression: Lose your breath, lose your turn. — Lynda Johnson Robb by way of explaining her sister’s occasional proximity

Media Invasion

Media interest in the First Ladies Conference was anticipated, to a point. But no one expected nearly 200 reporters to descend on Grand Rapids. They represented newspapers from the smallest Michigan dailies to USA Today and the Washington Post. Photographers and broadcast technicians went uncounted but their numbers were equally awesome. Former White House photographer David Kennerly, on assignment for Time, came from Washington to shoot a single group portrait of the participants. I’ve gone a lot farther for a lot less, he confided. Newsweek, U.S. News and World Report and Vanity Fair also covered the two day event.

Television attention was impressive too. On the first day of the Conference, morning viewers were treated to presidential family interviews on all three major networks. CBS Morning News earned the most visibility as Diane Sawyer spoke live, first with Mrs. Ford and Mrs. Carter, then with Susan Ford Vance and Lynda Johnson Robb. ABC’s Good Morning America and NBC’s Today aired remote telecasts from the Museum. Mrs. Ford and Mrs. Carter finally fulfilled their media obligations that day by talking with Hodding Carter on Nightline.

I was never comfortable when my father went into a crowd. I was almost afraid to watch the news. — Susan Ford Vance

Slam-bam and that was it, we were in the White House. I had just gotten my driver’s license and my first car and all of a sudden I had a 24-hour chaperone. — Luci Johnson Turpin
Richard Cheney emcees conference banquet.

There’s one of them. I’ve never seen one of them before. — Lynda Johnson Robb on the unsettling effect of first family celebrity

The hardest part was reading the morning newspaper. — Rosalynn Carter on being the wife of the president

Liz Carpenter, Diane Sawyer, Mary Hoyt, Lewis Gould

First Ladies Conference

Moderator and Keynote Speaker
Lewis Gould, Professor of History, University of Texas, Austin

Banquet Master of Ceremonies
Richard Cheney, U.S. Representative from Wyoming

Participants
Betty Ford
Rosalynn Carter
Lynda Johnson Robb
Luci Johnson Turpin
Susan Ford Vance
Eleanor Seagraves

Panelists
Elizabeth Carpenter, White House Press Secretary to Mrs. Johnson
Mary Hoyt, White House Press Secretary to Mrs. Carter
Diane Sawyer, Co-Anchor of "CBS Morning News"

Welcomes and Introductions
Robert P. Griffin, Chairman, Board of Trustees, Gerald R. Ford Foundation
Robert M. Warner, Archivist of the United States
Sarah Goddard Power, Trustee, Gerald R. Ford Foundation
James O’Neill, Assistant Archivist for Presidential Libraries
William K. Jones, Curator, Gerald R. Ford Museum
Don W. Wilson, Director, Gerald R. Ford Library and Museum
Briefly Noted

Set Momjian, a collector of White House china service, hosted a breakfast for First Ladies Conference participants and fifty guests after which he presented each family with a specially designed commemorative plate. The dinner plate, detailing a view of the White House in gold within a red border was produced by Lenox, the firm that has supplied china to the White House since the Wilson administration. The obverse side of the plate bears facsimile signatures of ten first ladies and the legend, First Ladies Breakfast, April 20, 1984.

The Capitol Hill Club was the scene for the annual meeting of the Gerald R. Ford Foundation on March 28. Those trustees whose terms had expired were re-elected as was former Senator Robert Griffin who will serve again as chairman of the board for 1984-85. A reception immediately following the meeting brought together many Ford administration officials, with Vice President George Bush among them. Senator Paul Laxalt of Nevada spoke following the Trustees Dinner.

The Gannett Foundation of Rochester, New York has announced that it will make a grant of $100,000 to the G.R. Ford Foundation. Citing its support for maintaining the historic continuity of the Presidency, CEO Eugene Dorsey of Gannett said the grant is intended to support film and publication projects relating to Library and Museum symposia.

In cooperation with the Sloan Foundation, the G.R. Ford Foundation has commissioned the preparation of a 30 minute videotape of the First Ladies Conference. The Library plans to make the edited program available to all presidential libraries for educational purposes and, possibly, to stations on the public network.

The Spring issue of LSA, a University of Michigan alumni magazine, includes an article The Ford Library: New Research and Teaching Potential. Author George Grassmuck is professor of political science at the University and secretary of the Gerald R. Ford Foundation.

Research Grants Awarded

Six scholars have been selected to receive grants in aid for research at the Gerald R. Ford Library. Funds are made available twice each year through a program established with assistance from the Earhart Foundation of Ann Arbor. The grants are intended for travel, living expenses while at the Library, and for photocopying expenses. The screening committee will meet next in November to evaluate applications. Those receiving grants at the Spring meeting and their project titles are:

Chen Baosen [Institute of American Studies, Chinese Academy of Social Sciences PRC], “The Economic Policies of the Ford Administration”;

David C. Jacobs [Univ. of Michigan-Flint], “John Dunlap’s Concept of Industrial Peace”;

Kim McQuaid [Lake Erie College], “Economic Policymaking during the Ford Administration”;

David M. O’Brien [Univ. of Virginia], “The Supreme Court and Constitutional Politics”;

Kenneth O’Reilly [Univ. of Alaska], “The F.B.I. and the Sixties: From Camelot to Watergate”;

Jeffrey K. Stine [Smithsonian Institution], “The Federal Response to Environmental Problems”.

Matthew Kerbel of the University of Michigan, a 1983 grant recipient, recently presented the results of his research, media access in the Ford administration, before a conference of the Midwest Political Science Association.

Ford’s Churchill Speech Published

A recent address delivered by President Ford at London’s Guildhall has been published and distributed by the Foundation. Chairman Bob Griffin sought its publication as a fine example of many excellent speeches that are delivered by the busy former President week in and week out ... in the United States and abroad. The occasion for Mr. Ford’s lecture, Sir Winston Churchill’s 109th birthday commemoration, was sponsored by the English Speaking Union headed by the Duke of Edinburgh. Copies have been sent to those who receive the newsletter and other friends of the Library and Museum. If you have not received a copy please contact the Library. There is no charge.

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Library Receives Early Photo of Abraham Lincoln

These cameras are painfully truthful. — Abraham Lincoln

The autographed Lincoln portrait shown here was recently donated to the Library by Don Gibson of Cincinnati, Ohio. The second known photograph of Abraham Lincoln, it was taken during the winter of 1857 when the prairie lawyer was in Chicago on legal business and campaigning for the up-and-coming Republican party. The following year, prints of this photograph were hawked by young boys dogging Lincoln’s campaign steps as he sought to unseat Senator Stephen A. Douglas. They called attention to their wares with an impudent cry:

Here’s your likeness of Old Abe: Will look a good deal better when he gets his hair combed.

The original negative was believed lost when fire swept the studios of the photographer, Alexander Hesler. Mr. Gibson’s gift to the Library is one of the few surviving prints but it is the circumstance of Lincoln’s autograph that elevates this particular image to rare Americana. It is the only known signed photograph of this pose. While Lincoln never refused to put his signature to a camera portrait, nearly all contemporary collectors were content with the unsigned picture, not deeming his autograph of much importance.

The earliest portrait of Lincoln is a daguerreotype said to have been made in Springfield in 1846 when he was thirty-seven years old. About eleven years passed before Alexander Hesler made the second, now known as the “tousled hair” photograph. Sitting before Hesler’s camera, Lincoln, on his own testimony, ran his fingers through his “wild republican hair” moments before his picture was taken. The resulting “bird’s nest” apparently caused him no distress.

In a letter to a friend, Lincoln pronounced the photograph a very true one although he admitted it found little favor with his wife and friends.

Once the property of the late Oliver R. Barrett, noted collector of Lincolniana, the photograph will be exhibited at a later time.

U.S.-China Trade Records Donated

The Ford Library is now the repository for the archival collections of The National Council for United States - China Trade. By action of its board of directors, the National Council’s files are to be transferred to Ann Arbor sometime this year. Thereafter, records more than five years old will be retired to the Library annually.

The National Council for United States - China Trade is a private non-profit organization which provides information and assistance to nearly 500 member American firms doing business with the People’s Republic of China. Offices are maintained in Washington and Beijing. Former United Nations ambassador Christopher Phillips is the Council’s president and executive director.

The Council’s files will complement Mr. Ford’s own congressional and presidential papers on China which extend back to his first trip to the PRC in 1972 as House Minority Leader. With this acquisition Director Don Wilson believes the Library will become a major repository for contemporary China material. Equally significant, Wilson adds, is the Library’s opportunity to attract new researchers.

With the assistance of Michel Oksenberg, Leonard Woodcock, and other leading professors from the University of Michigan’s Center for Chinese Studies, the Ford Library will be regarded as a principal resource for Sino-American research, particularly in the area of economic relations, Wilson said.

Gerald R. Ford Foundation

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