

W. Post
8/19/74

Grand Rapids Calm, Confident of Ford

By Tom LaBelle

Special to The Washington Post

GRAND RAPIDS, Aug. 8

—For a city that suddenly finds itself the hometown of the next President of the United States, Grand Rapids seemed little different today from any other American city reeling from the news coming out of Washington.

There was plenty of spontaneous conversation among strangers, and most of it concerned the downfall of Richard M. Nixon. But one had to ask a direct question to get a comment about Ford.

"He'll be all right," said Sue LaBarge, a secretary. "He won't be exciting like Kennedy but he'll be ok."

Richard M. Gillett, a banker, said he was surprised at how subdued the city seemed, but he said he believes the enormity of Nixon's fall had overshadowed Ford's ascension.

"I detect the soberness in people I've seen today," said Gillett, who is chairman and chief executive officer of Old Kent Bank and Trust Co.

"It's like, when a guy really finally falls, you can't help feeling compassion. You don't want to see him pounded into the ground."

Concerning Ford, Gillett said he was prayerful that Ford could do the job. "He's got the right ingredients—the No. 1 thing he has to offer is the integrity that people are hungry for."

The Rev. Lyman S. Parks, the 57-year-old black mayor of Grand Rapids and a staunch Republican, spent much of the day in his office at First Community AME Church, where he is pastor, taking telephone calls from anxious blacks across the country who were trying to get a line on the new chief executive.

Parks told a man from New York that Ford has "always been fair and honest" in matters pertaining to minority rights. He said he



United Press International

Tom Ford, brother of the Vice President, watches news accounts early yesterday at his home in Lansing, Mich., on the probability of his brother being sworn in as President as the successor to Richard M. Nixon.

expects him to continue to operate that way as President.

Another caller questioned the mayor about Ford's executive ability. "I believe the man grows in the office," Parks told him. "He's a hard-working man and he'll do everything he can to restore the dignity, stability, and vitality of the presidency."

Between telephone calls, Parks worked on a resolution he will present to the city commission to extend the city's official congratulations to President Ford.

Parks, too, seemed to view the day's events with mixed

feelings. "It's exciting," he said. "And certainly we're happy for Jerry, but it's sad that this is the way it happens."

The mayor, who at Ford's invitation offered the opening prayer at the 1972 Republican convention in Miami, had supported Richard Nixon and he still credits Nixon for great accomplishments. "You can't take away credit of the things he's done," he said.

Not everybody in Grand Rapids was subdued about the prospect of Gerald Ford becoming President. Members of the 1930 football

team of old South High School—a group that has held annual reunions through the years—were exuberant.

Ford played center on that team, which won the state championship.

Clifford Gettings, team coach who is now retired, said he believes Ford will make a great president. "Jerry" he said, "is capable of coming through in almost any situation."

One of the happiest men in Grand Rapids was Burgess Wisner, who played left halfback on the 1930 team and who was one of Ford's close high school buddies. Wisner said he predicted years ago that Ford eventually would become President. "It's wonderful," he said. "From all I've known about Jerry, he'll be just great."

About five years ago, South High School went out of existence. Wisner said he and another teammate, Arthur Brown, have been trying to acquire the eight-foot base drum used by the marching band.

"It's just sitting in a corner somewhere getting dusty," Wisner said. "I told Art we'll get that drum and have a parade, just the two of us pounding the drum for Jerry."