

What Grand Rapids did for Jerry Ford— and vice versa

By Robert Sherrill

In his address to Congress shortly after taking over the Presidency, Gerald Ford twice mentioned his hometown, Grand Rapids. This was considerably more attention than Richard Nixon ever gave Whittier, Calif., or Lyndon Johnson gave Johnson City, Tex., in a major speech and it no doubt testified to Ford's real affection for the place where he grew up and that had kept him in Congress for 25 years.

However, grateful as he was to his constituents in the Fifth District of Michigan, he also let it be known privately that, as President, he no longer felt an allegiance to their backwardness. "Forget the voting record," he was quoted as saying. "The voting record reflects Grand Rapids."

That would mean a majority of the Grand Rapids electorate had pressed him into the actions he took as Congressman to undercut civil-rights legislation and to oppose Medicaid, job-opportunity funds, rent subsidies, Federal aid to education, mass-transit money, urban-renewal funds and everything that went into the general slot of "poverty programs."

Partly because Ford was its Representative, and partly because of the self-perpetuating powers of legend, Grand Rapids had the reputation of being a square, unimaginative, conservative, strictly Midwest Gothic city that for generations has been squished into a Calvinistic straitjacket by its large population of Dutch lineage.

This is what I expected to find when I visited Grand Rapids recently. And I found just the opposite. From what I saw and heard out there, it seems more likely that Gerald Ford's 25-year voting record represented Grand Rapids; it was a simple down-the-line expression of Republican partisanship, and Grand Rapids is not simple at all, or unimaginative, or ideologically monolithic, or predictable.

With its sick downtown and its boring suburban sprawl, Grand Rapids does look like hundreds of other American urban areas, but below the surface it has a fascinating split personality. While its crime rate is climbing faster than the national average (up 11.7 per cent locally in 1973 compared to 6 per cent nationally), its stability in terms of home ownership is also much higher (75 per cent in Kent County).

The psychic split is also, in some ways, a geographic one. The Grand River cuts through the city. Traditionally, the tone of the city has been

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A reporter visits the President's hometown, expecting to find a conservative, Calvinistic, square segment of Middle America. Among his surprises: the city is way ahead of its favorite son.

set by the Dutch/German/English, Protestant, affluent element on the east bank. (The Dutch make up 39 per cent of the county's population.) But sometimes—especially in recent years—the Polish/Lithuanian/Latino, Catholic, mostly blue-collar romantics on the west bank have set the tone.

Grand Rapids's Onar Khayyam impulses are just below the surface. Philip W. Buchen, one of President Ford's legal advisers, briefly dropped out of one of Grand Rapids's most prestigious law firms (not that he ever practiced law with much enthusiasm) to write poetry and, as one friend put it, "contemplate things." This 35-year-old heir to one of Grand Rapids's old family businesses told me he longs for the day when he can quit the industry and



Gerald Ford's boyhood home: In need of restoration.

open a book-and-pipe shop. One of Grand Rapids's prominent politicians got fed up with things a few months ago and went off on a motorcycle to write poetry and drink wine in the mountains of New Mexico; he's back now, but he daydreams of another excursion, this time "maybe with 15 Indian women."

Despite the reputation of Grand Rapids as a city cowering under the heavy hand of Dutch Calvinism, it has always had its fair share of whoopee. Until 1950, when national chains squeezed them out of the market, it had always had at least one local brewery. Several pillars of the community informed me, with what almost seemed to be pride, that that area used to have one of the highest illegitimate birth rates in the nation. Half a dozen years ago, an enterprising pilgrim moved into Grand Rapids and opened a porno movie house and a porno book store, and was sent to prison for being a pioneer; but X-rated movies these days can be viewed in three or four theaters.

There was a time when members of a (Dutch) Christian Reformed Church congregation, learning that the trolley line which passed in front of their church carried people to an amusement park on Sundays, went out at night and dug up the tracks by hand. But those were ancient rages, no longer applicable. The influence today is still pervasive, but quieter. Only a couple of years ago did stores start trying to do much business on Sundays. But there is really no way to tell where the Dutch churches' weight in such matters ends and the Baptists' weight, say, begins, for the latter are strong in Grand Rapids, too, as are Catholics and Methodists and Presbyterians — though all together they did not have the power, or perhaps the inclination, to keep "Deep Throat" away.

Urban renewal went through the downtown area like a \$50-million glacier, leaving behind some imposingly cold, square, glassy buildings. In the renewed area, there is absolutely no mixture of architecture, old and new, and no mixture of purpose: no theaters, no coffeehouses, no cafes. After the bankers and the government workers go home, the downtown area of Grand Rapids, and especially the renewed portion, is as lifeless as the inside of the corner mailbox after the last pickup.

Some citizens made a passionate effort to save the old city hall with its clock tower. They wrote Representative Ford asking what could be done and he replied that all they needed was the cooperation of the local developers (that is, bankers), but the developers said no. Mary Stiles, former wife of Jack Stiles, one of Ford's early campaign managers,

The first real schism between Ford and the people of Grand Rapids didn't come until he took over as Vice President and went out defending Nixon.

chained herself to the wrecking ball to delay the razing. But the developers outwaited her.

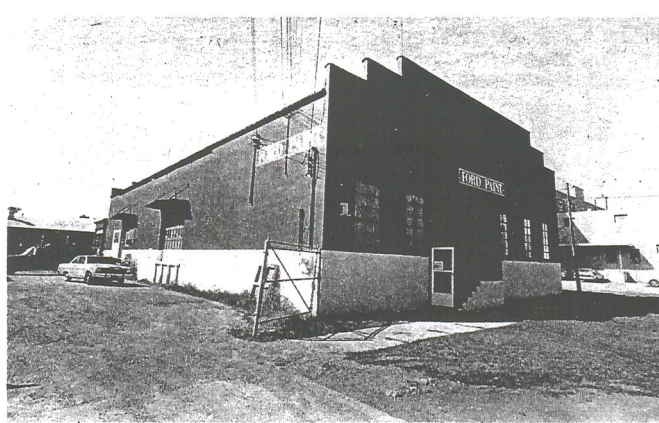
That may sound as if they wound up with nothing but acres and acres of Russian-style progress. But actually it doesn't look too bad. And the reason is that Grand Rapids managed to be different in a way that one probably wouldn't anticipate in a place half way between Plainwell and Newaygo.

They bought a Calder and plunked it right down in the middle of Vandenberg Center plaza. Not just a Calder but the most enormous stabile in this hemisphere: 42 tons of red metal that from a distance looks something like the propeller of the Queen Mary, 54 feet long, 43 feet high, 30 feet wide.

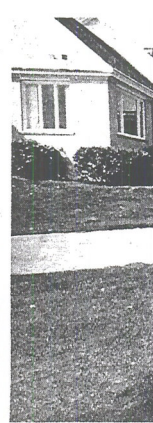
It came about—as few major civic endeavors in Grand Rapids do—in an almost offhanded fashion. Henry Geldzahler, curator of 20th century art at the Metropolitan Museum, was in town to give a lecture. Mrs. LeVant Mulinix III, a tall, blonde, arts-socialite dervish, was driving him around, showing him what the city was tearing down and what it was building. Geldzahler, sensing an impending barrenness, mentioned that Federal grants might be available for monumental civic sculpture. Mrs. Mulinix wrote Representative Ford; Ford leaned on Roger L. Stevens, then chairman of the National Endowment for the Arts, and five days later Stevens was calling Mrs. Mulinix to say that they had decided Grand Rapids should be the first city in America to receive a sculpture grant. The Federal Government came through with \$45,000; private donations took care of the rest of the \$125,000—and to Mrs. Mulinix's surprise, Alexander Calder agreed to do it at that bargain price.

Most people in Grand Rapids seem to think *La Grande Vitesse*, as it is called, is the greatest thing that's happened to their town since the first furniture factory opened. The Chamber of Commerce puts out a brochure that assures visitors that to stand before this stabile "and gaze up, along its massive, sweeping planes is to catch something of the vitality, newness and progress that is Grand Rapids today." Hard-nosed businessmen get lyrical over it. One told me: "We had lost our identity. The Calder was like a great big heart bringing us to life again." Another businessman said: "The Calder expressed something: That this town dared to do something. We weren't like Chicago that hired Picasso, who wasn't a sculptor, to do a civic sculpture. Grand Rapids went out and hired the greatest sculptor in the world. We didn't do the easy thing and go after the biggest name. We went after a particular genius. The town is proud of doing that."

As for Ford, the stabile has been a fabulous store of political riches. Until the Calder came along, Ford took a very dim view of the National Endowment for the Arts and voted against funding it. There's no reason to suppose he responded to Mrs. Mulinix's plea for help for any reason except that she and her family are important constituents (and maybe because Betty Ford was a classmate of Mrs. Mulinix's mother-in-law). But when he saw that most Grand Rapidsians were ga-ga over the sculpture, he became the most vocal artsy convert in Washington. When the National Endowment's budget next came up in (Continued on Page 72)



The Ford Paint Company: Founded by Gerald Ford Sr., the company is no longer controlled by the Ford family, although Dick Ford, the President's half-brother, manages the plant.



Dr. Duncan Littlefair, author and pastor of Grand Rapids's maverick Fountain Street Church: "My church," he says, "would be considered different even in New York City."

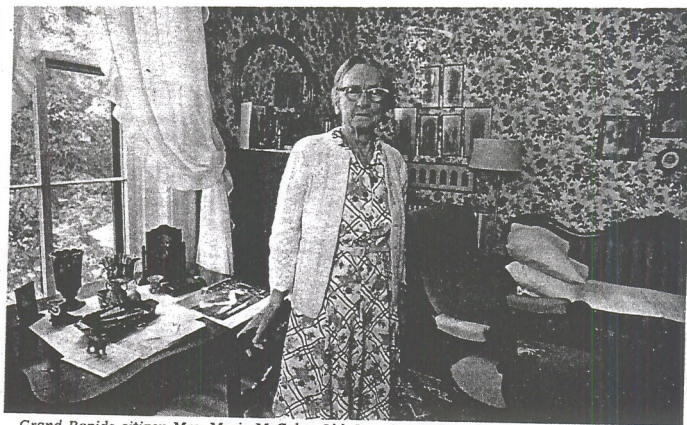


Esther Seidman, a Grand Rapidsian and mother of Presidential adviser William Seidman.





Dick Ford, half-brother of the President: "Jerry does use me as a sounding board for . . . his ideas, but . . . he's too liberal for me."



Grand Rapids citizen Mrs. Marie McCabe: Old Grand Rapids, embracing the Dutch/German/English community on the affluent east bank, has traditionally set the tone of the city.



Downtown Grand Rapids: Although the city looks like many other American urban areas, it still manages to be quite individual.



Grand Rapids's other citizens: Racial tensions exist in the city, but so far there has been little racial conflict. The black population in Grand Rapids has risen to nearly 15 per cent.



Mother and child: Mexican American residents of Grand Rapids.



Tom Ford, half-brother of the President and a former member of Michigan's Legislature.

Michael Geiger

Grand Rapids

Continued from Page 32

Congress he urged passage. It gave him a marvelous opportunity to pretend he was a bumbling jock feeling his way around in the world of egg-heads—a role he plays very effectively.

As President, he is still using the Calder to score that kind of image. In his first Presidential visit to the Kennedy Center for the 10th anniversary of the National Council on the Arts, made up of prominent figures in the world of the arts, Ford referred with pride to "the Alexander Calder mobile in my hometown. Mo-beel. Is that the right pronunciation? [It is the right pronunciation for a different kind of Calder; this one is a stabile, as Ford was undoubtedly aware, but a little ignorance is part of the of the show.] I point it out to all the visitors, including the Secret Service, and I tell them it's nothing they should worry about." It got the usual laugh. "I am a converted individual. And I make no apology for it. Converts are known sometimes as better advocates than those brought up in the religion."

With everyone having such a good time and benefiting so richly from this one work of

art, it might be supposed that Grand Rapids's top people would rush on to find other community - art pleasures, even if that meant spending their own money for them, instead of waiting to get a project primed with a Federal grant.

But apparently that isn't the way things work in Grand Rapids, or at least not where the moneybags are concerned. The plain folks of Grand Rapids have not been stingy in supporting the standard sort of community development; in the past 20 years they have voted to tax themselves for everything that's been put on the ballot: a new airport, a new jail, a county hospital, a juvenile court center, a library. They voted to tax themselves to build the only county mental hospital in Michigan. They voted to strap themselves into a city income tax.

But when it comes to community luxuries of the sort that must depend on heavy drafts of philanthropic dollars, the rich stratum of Grand Rapids society does not step forward enthusiastically. It's said that the city has more than 200 millionaires, the oldest of their fortunes having been built on lumber, foundries and furniture. Some of the founders of the great

fortunes stole timber from their neighbor's property, stole logs that were being transported downstream and exploited indentured servants brought over from the old country. Their descendants no longer steal money; they simply sit on it and stare suspiciously at such new entrepreneurs as the two local gentlemen, Jay VanAndel and Richard DeVos, who, 16 years ago, started a soap business in the basements of their homes and today operate a veritable international empire under the name of Amway Corporation, headquartered in the Grand Rapids suburb of Ada. The company claimed sales of \$210-million in 1973. Each year it throws a big convention for its distributors; 10,000 or so show up; people such as Paul Harvey are hired to deliver rousing patriotic-profits sermons to them.

The old families sniff at such goings-on. Anything new, in style or pace or substance, is critically analyzed.

But new or old, the wealthy people of Grand Rapids generally have one thing in common: They don't exactly overwhelm anyone with philanthropy. There are exceptions, but only a few. (The very wealthy seem to prefer to give, if at all, to their churches. DeVos and VanAndel, for example, gave \$100,000 to move their old parochial high school — Christian Reformed Church school — out of the ghetto and reestablish it elsewhere.) "Grand Rapids hasn't



Mrs. LeVant Mulnix III, Grand Rapids socialite, stands before the Alexander Calder stabile which she was instrumental in bringing to her city.

fulfilled a Community Chest pledge in years," said one middle-aged executive. "It's a triumph if we come close." I asked John Wood Blodgett Jr., who controls one of the lumber fortunes, if it was true, as I had been told, that he was about to give away many millions to a college. "For God's sake," he gasped, "where did you hear that? Of course it's not true."

For decades, the people of Grand Rapids have really turned out for their Civic Theater productions. But these are performed in an old worn-out ex-movie house. The only toilet available to the actors is under the stage and can't be used during a performance because the flush can be heard in the audience. There's a drive now under way to collect about \$2-million to build a new theater on the bank of the Grand River, and once again the drive is being headed by Mrs. Mulnix, who brought the Calder to town, and by her husband, whose family is old Grand Rapids but not among the richest. Their social peers are not chipping in. "This is not a very philanthropic town," says Mrs. Mulnix.

Some of the city's decay has been the result of the large influx of blacks. But the migratory torrent didn't commence until Ford had left town.

In the picture of South High School's 1930 football team, on which Jerry Ford was an all-state center, there is one black face, right in the middle of the team. This was Silas McGee, and for a number of years he was referred to as "the lost member," because his teammates didn't know what had happened to him; then, at the 1970 reunion of the team, it was joyfully announced that Silas had been found: He was longshoring on the docks of San Francisco. When Ford was growing up in Grand Rapids, there was some *de facto* segregation, but there was also some integration. In any event, the race question was no big deal in those days, because, in 1920, blacks constituted only 0.8 per cent of the population. Two decades later, they still made up only 1 per cent—1,660 blacks in a city of 164,292. The heavy migration of blacks to the North during the war raised this to 4 per cent by 1950, and in the next 10 years the percentage doubled. Today it is pushing toward 15 per cent.

Racial tensions exist, of course, but so far there's been little racial panic. When Detroit was having its big race riot in 1967, Grand Rapids blacks threw a little riot of their own, but it was handled in a typically Grand Rapids fashion: quite a few arrests (150 or so) for a cooling-off period, but no deaths and not many injuries.

The most dramatic moment of the riot had a touch of humor, when the blacks were whooping and hollering and threatening, and Deputy Police Chief Francis Pierce just stood there smiling, talking to the mob, and leaning on his carbine as if it were a cane. Pierce is Grand Rapids's authentic hero; he came off Iwo Jima with a Medal of Honor, and seems to have spent the rest of his life trying to recapture the thrill of that era.

A couple of years ago, black people took Grand Rapids school officials into court and won an order to increase busing for racial balance; but when the order was handed down, it contained more praise than condemnation for the way Grand Rapids had been performing. The judge noted, among other

Ford's boyhood home, a two-story frame, has been abused by lack of tenants. Windows are broken, screens ripped out; the back porch has rotted; electric wires have been cut.

things, that the facilities at the predominantly black schools had always been as good as at white schools; that Grand Rapids residents had not used private schools to escape integration; that the school board's efforts since 1965 to achieve racial balance were "impressive" and "dramatic"; that although the school board may have been a bit reluctant, it had been hiring some black teachers for predominantly white schools even back in the nineteen-forties, and between 1964 and 1967, when the push was really on to integrate everything, the board hired 98 per cent of the black teachers interviewed.

If the atmosphere of the neighborhood where Ford grew up (through his junior year at South High) wasn't bon ton, it was a long way from being rundown. It was a neighborhood of storekeepers and railroad engineers and teachers—the good, substantial backbone of a city that then had a population of about 150,000. Today the neighborhood is almost totally black and some of the houses in nearby blocks are in poor shape, although it is still true, as a Chamber of Commerce official put it, "being dilapidated here is different from being dilapidated in New York City."

After his junior year in high school, Ford lived in East Grand Rapids, which has hung onto its whiteness, although the blacks are moving closer.

Ford's earlier home, a two-story frame, has been abused by lack of tenants. Windows are broken, screens ripped out; the back porch has rotted; the electric wires have been cut. Until a few weeks ago, the President's former home could have been purchased for \$10,000; it had been on the market a long time with little prospect of being snapped up, because, the realtors said, "that is not a salable neighborhood." The Veterans Administration owns the house by default but re-

portedly would be happy to give it to the city if it wanted to turn the place into a lower-middle-class shrine. Some residents think that would be a fine idea but the house should be moved to a safer neighborhood. To the restoration purists, that's a horrible suggestion. "Disastrous, absolutely disastrous, that's what it would be," says Weldon Frankforter, director of the Grand Rapids Public Museum and officer in the Kent County Historical Society. "Imagine having that hole in the neighborhood, and people going by it and asking what happened to the house, and we'd have to say we moved it away from those people to save it."

Buchen, Ford's legal aide, has sounded out the locals to see what their attitude is toward restoring the house; apparently Ford doesn't want to do it unless there's some enthusiasm. Oddly enough, there is no great drive to save the house as yet, says Frankforter. As of early September, the City Commission hadn't expressed an interest. "But don't get me wrong," Frankforter adds hurriedly. "When Mr. Ford's here, the Rotary Club, the Breakfast Club, everybody is really proud. He's ours. But this just isn't a rah-rah town."

Newspaper stories about the neighborhood and the condition of the old Ford house have made people in the block pretty mad. Next door are Mr. and Mrs. Henry Jones, black people in their late 60's, he a retired teamster and she a retired domestic. They've lived there for 15 years, but Mrs. Jones was born and reared only a block away. She doesn't feel that she and the other blacks have "pushed in." The neighborhood has always had some integration. Mrs. Jones went to Ford's high school about 10 years before he did. She walked to school with whites as well as blacks, she says. "We visited whites' homes. There were no locked doors. We had black boys on the

high-school football team.

"In those days, blacks worked only in foundries and in hotels and on the railroad. And of course they were domestics. I used to work for Dr. James Logie, physician. He's a cousin of Ford's. Ford was there for dinner a couple of times, but he wouldn't remember me. He might remember my apple pie. He loved it. My niece worked for Grandma Ford. We called her that. I worked for her, too, some.

"Now blacks can work just anywhere. Grand Rapids is one of the greatest places in the world to live and raise a family. Nobody moves away. My daughter and granddaughters and great-grandchildren live here."

Mrs. Jones's home — as every house on the block, except the Fords' and another on the corner that looks a bit seedy — is shipshape, inside and out. She insisted I come inside to see for myself. All homes but one on the block are owner-occupied. The one white in the block, Sylvia English, who wishes reporters would stop listing her as 78 years old, "could just cry" for the way Richard Nixon was treated and remembers nothing about Ford except that "he used to swing on Georgia Hopper's clothesline pole."

Gerald Ford Sr., founder of the Ford Paint Company, brought home the Chamber of Commerce philosophy. He is dead now, and the word is that the family no longer has a controlling interest in the company, but the President's half-brother, Dick, does still manage the plant. In Dick Ford's office, the few photos on the wall are of himself and his brothers in golf togs, which is appropriate enough since most of the company's business these days is supplying paints and varnishes to golf club manufacturers.

"Jerry has an 18 handicap," says Dick. "I have a six handicap. When Jerry comes home, my brother Jim [a Grand Rapids optometrist] and I usually manage to get in a round of golf with him. We get somebody else to make up the foursome, but with the understanding that there will be no political talk. We are all very close. Jerry is 11 years older than I am, and he was a great brother. He was just the right age to introduce me to tennis and baseball and football.

"Jerry does use me as a

sounding board for some of his ideas, but I think I've already detected his moving to the left. I'm a right-winger. He's too liberal for me. I've only written him about something political once in my life.

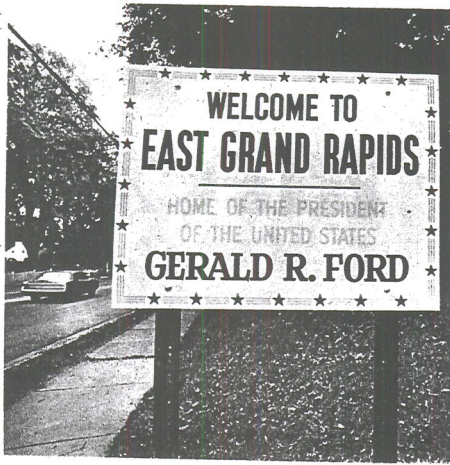
"I think it was in 1969. I told him I didn't think the draft dodgers and deserters should get amnesty. I don't remember whether he answered my letter.

"By and large, life hasn't changed for me since Jerry became President. When he was sworn in, tears came to my eyes. I was proud of him. But nothing has changed for me. Not at all. When he was being considered for the Vice Presidency, some investigators for the House Judiciary Committee came by here, checking up on the paint company. I told them we weren't selling a single bucket to the Federal Government. I told them we didn't even put in a bid when they were going to build the new post office here. They asked me why, and I said: 'Because I knew some day there'd be some jokers like you coming around asking questions like this.'"

Old-timers say that the Ford Paint Company made its first killing selling paint to the state of Michigan.

There's another half-brother Tom who hangs out around Lansing as a minor state functionary. He used to represent part of Grand Rapids in the Legislature, but he was defeated in 1972. Asked to describe Tom, one city leader replied: "When he was on the library commission, some of the women felt East Grand Rapids should have a library and they came to him with that proposal. East Grand Rapids is where the Ford home is. Tom replied: 'We don't really need a library out there. Everyone has his own books.' Does that tell you about Tom? Eventually, they got a library, but Tom voted against it."

The Ford boys—all good athletes—can perhaps be forgiven if the mark of the Jack-Armstrong-boola-boola era is still evident in their view of the world. They grew up when every young American boy was assured that if he did well in high-school sports and respected his elders and went to church, God and the alumni would take care of him. The way to be different was to fit in the best. It was a generation that would have taken as a compliment the remark by the Rev. Donald Carey, former minister of the Fords' church. Grace Episcopal:



With pride!

"Gerald Ford is a normal, decent God-fearing man, but you can say that about a lot of people."

The Chamber of Commerce of Ford's youth advertised not only the existence of "150 miles of tree-lined streets; 43 parks and playgrounds covering 1,273 acres," but also "the only filtration plant in the country with a lecture room" and "the largest show-case factory in the world." Today the Chamber mentions that one can shoot a deer within seven minutes of downtown and that Yamaha has placed its first U.S. assembly plant in Grand Rapids. It is this orderly, stable and commercial side of Grand Rapids, still very much alive, that is Ford's political umbilical.

"Jerry Ford was fortunate enough," says Tom LaBelle, an editor of The Grand Rapids Press, "to grow up in a town that rewarded virtue. An Eagle Scout was respected, and he became an Eagle Scout. Two of his three brothers were, too. A sports hero was respected—they weren't looked upon as jocks. They were genuine heroes. And Jerry Ford became one. There were two newspapers in those days and they posted football scores outside, by the quarter, and mobs showed up to keep in touch with the games. When Jerry chokes up today as he talks about football, he's reflecting the feeling toward football in his youth."

Being a high-school hero, Ford received such special treatment that he hardly knew the Great Depression had hit. A cafe owner across

from South High gave him \$2 a week and lunch for waiting on tables; at about the same time, Ford's father was paying grown men at his paint manufacturing company \$5 a week to raise their families on.

But just because Jerry Ford has always been pampered by his hometown does not mean he's Grand Rapids's ideal statesman. True, he always got more than 60 percent of the vote, but that can't safely be equated with his district's ideology. Many who disagreed almost totally with his political philosophy voted for him because he performed superbly in getting Federal money for his district and in servicing constituent needs. Or sometimes they voted for him simply because they liked him. Just about everybody in Grand Rapids seems to have a fond memory of good old Jerry.

Paul Dreher, director of the Civic Theater: "I'm a Democrat. I voted against him for the first eight years I was here. Then I said: 'Hell, he's a great Representative for the district.' And I started voting for him. I just wish he'd kept his mouth shut on some other things." Which reminded Dreher: "Couple of years ago, a group here that was going to put on a Handel oratorio asked Ford to start each section with a five-minute reading from the Bible. I coached him for a couple of hours on how the Bible should be read. Here he was, minority leader of the House, and yet he worked at it like it was going

The Ford boys grew up when every American boy was guaranteed that if he did well in sports, respected his elders and went to church, God and the alumni would take care of him.

to be his own funeral oration. He could have just got up there and faked it."

Dr. William Kooistra, a fund-raiser for the Democratic party and founder of Project Rehab for drug addicts: "Ford came by and visited one of our group therapies, flopped down on a pillow with some of our heroin users. If you had taken a poll beforehand, everyone there — they were blacks — would have been against him. You know how his record on civil rights would be received in the black community. But this group was impressed. They said this guy is O.K."

There's only one thing in Ford's career that puzzles Kooistra. Not long ago, he discovered, and hung up, an old 8 by 10 photograph Ford had given him when Kooistra was a kid of 12. The photograph was inscribed: "To Billy, with best wishes and good luck, Jerry." The picture was of Ford in his Navy uniform. "Why," asks Kooistra, "was Ford still handing out photos of himself in uniform three years after the war was over?"

Dr. John Otterbacher, Democratic state representative from Grand Rapids: "I don't think people in this town knew what Jerry Ford voted for or against. The thing was, he helped his constituents. There isn't a person in this town who wasn't either personally helped by Ford or had a shirttail relative who was helped by Ford sometime during his Congressional career. The sonofabitch worked. He could have stood anywhere on any subject, just about, and the people here wouldn't have cared."

Editor LaBelle: "In a lot of ways, Jerry Ford, as Congressman, spoke for a conservatism that is present here, but it is not a conservatism that is pervasive. Jerry Ford spoke for himself. I understand he has been saying: 'Don't look at my voting record. That was when I was representing the Fifth District. Now I'm representing 435 districts.' Actually, he could have voted more pro-

gressively and got by with it in the Fifth District."

This is certainly true in regard to the war. Ford's hometown paper was one of only two major Michigan dailies opposing U.S. intervention in Vietnam as early as 1966. Gerald Elliott, then chief editorial writer at The Grand Rapids Press, says: "We represented the minority opinion in the community when we started out, but by at least 1969 or 1970 a majority of the community had joined us."

Ten years ago, when Ford's voting record was heavily right-wing, the voters of his district went overwhelmingly against right-winger Barry Goldwater and for Lyndon Johnson. In 1968, Ford's district gave Hubert Humphrey only 39 per cent of its vote—but that was as much as Humphrey received in the home district of House Speaker Carl Albert, a liberal-to-moderate Democrat. Senator Philip Hart, who gets perfect or near-perfect ratings from those standard liberal barometers, A.D.A. and COPE, has carried off strong pluralities in Ford's district in his last two elections.

When Ford won office in 1948 by defeating Bartel Jonkman, a true-blue hack and isolationist who made the mistake of opposing the United Nations and the Marshall Plan (which were put together partly through the good offices of Grand Rapids's native son and idol, Senator Arthur Vandenberg), he had the support and encouragement of not only most conservatives but of many New Deal-type liberals, like Julius Amberg, special assistant to the Secretary of War in World War II and a Grand Rapids lawyer, Robert Kleiner, now Democratic district chairman, and Walter Reuther and Leonard Woodcock of the United Auto Workers who also supported Ford in his first campaign.

"The first time Jerry made a speech in 1948, it was at the Fountain Street Church," Kleiner remembers. "Intern-

(Continued on Page 86)

tionalism was very much the key issue. My mother was very much involved in United Nations work. I remember she came out after hearing Jerry talk and she said to me and to Woodcock who was standing there with me: "You gentlemen will be sorry. This young man is ignorant."

"That is the way Jerry turned out. He's not stupid, he's not dumb. He's ignorant. It's his illogical, excessive partisanship that sometimes makes him seem dumb. He has a lack of sensitivity. He would give a hungry child his lunch, but he can't understand that when he voted against the hot-lunch program he was taking lunches away from millions of children. Grand Rapids has progressed far faster than he has. The conservative Republican philosophy still dominates, but it has been forced to change by fiscal reality. Aid to Dependent Children and such things have forced the town to change."

Ford's roundabout attention to that Federal "fiscal reality" was one key to his popularity. He would vote against a school program, for example; and then, after it passed, he would scoop up a hefty share for Grand Rapids. Nancy Dempsey, a Democrat, an executive at a local television station and sister of William Seidman, one of Ford's economic advisers, says: "Jerry got lots of Head Start and Follow Through money for the schools. He got great grants for the local colleges. Wow! He made sure we got our share. When there was money going around in Washington, we got our share and more."

Ford voted against urban-renewal money for the nation, but then helped swing millions of urban-renewal dollars into Grand Rapids. The folks back home apparently didn't mind their Jerry's playing his ideological games, independent of his constituents' point of view, so long as he produced materially for them. There was a city referendum a few years ago on whether or not we should get out of Vietnam, and the referendum passed; Ford apparently gave it little heed, but the home-folks forgave him.

In fact, the first real schism between Ford and the people of Grand Rapids didn't come until he took over as Vice President and went out defending Nixon against his critics. After Ford's first major speech as Vice President—in which he accused "powerful pressure organizations" of

using Watergate as a ruse to "crush the President and his philosophy" and "dominate the nation"—his office received so many letters (most of them bitterly opposing his sentiments) that for the first time in his career he answered homefolks with a form letter.

"That was the first time he was really raked over the coals," Mrs. Dempsey recalls. "You should have seen the mail that came to the television station. I never thought I'd see the day when he'd be called a skunk."

Grand Rapids is called "The Furniture City," just as San Antonio is called "The Alamo City, and New Jersey is called "The Garden State," in memory of things past. The city's glories rose like the aurora borealis following its furniture-exhibit successes at the Philadelphia Centennial Exposition; orders poured in from all over the world. Some high-quality furniture is still produced in Grand Rapids, but compared to what it used to be, furniture is more a tradition than an industry. Much of the quantity production has moved to places like High Point, N. C., and Memphis, Tenn., where factory hands are cheaper.

Furniture manufacturers had imported many of their craftsmen from the old country, making them promise that they would repay their masters by voting Republican and never joining a union. When auto manufacturers talked about moving into Grand Rapids with a plant, community leaders fought them off, fearing that the economy would be tainted by decent wages. It wasn't until 1936, when General Motors came in with a stamping plant, that this attitude began to be wiped out. Heavy unionism and higher wages did follow, and while this put a dent in the furniture industry, it created the kind of healthy labor pool that attracted other industries. It also created the base for what has been, for several years now, a real two-party attitude in Grand Rapids.

But still the notion that Grand Rapids is nothing but a furniture city persists. Agriculture Secretary Earl Butz made a speech not long ago in which he tried to make it sound as if Ford knew all about farm problems because he actually came from a town that was nothing but a small island of furniture factories in a vast sea of Michigan farmland. He said: "Take away a

few furniture factories and a strong wind could blow the rest of Grand Rapids into Canada"—or at least that's the quote that filtered back to the residents of Grand Rapids, and they considered it a pretty dumb remark.

Hanging on just as stubbornly as the one-industry image is the one-party reputation. Grand Rapids is still thought of as "solid Republican" because the evolution into a two-party city has occurred with so little rancor, and in such a clubby way, that the outside world hasn't noticed.

Democratic district chairman Kleiner says he wasn't a partisan Democrat until the mid-fifties, when Phil Hart, then Michigan's Lieutenant Governor, "persuaded me that's where I wanted to be." A decade later, William Seidman, Kleiner's cousin, would be persuaded by George Romney to take on the Republican label and run for state auditor general. That's the way the power has often been divvied up in Grand Rapids, in a conversational "Ah, come on over and be one of us" way. No hard feelings. Before Democrat Richard F. VanderVeen decided to run for Ford's old seat this year, he made sure that Seidman wasn't going to run on the Republican ticket. VanderVeen likes Seidman a lot—"my favorite Republican"—and wouldn't have wanted to run against him.

The growth of the Democratic party and of the progressive wing of the Republican party in Grand Rapids occurred so naturally that some sharp political technicians, including Ford himself, apparently didn't realize what was happening. Although VanderVeen's victory in the special election was an abnormality, to say the least—he was the first Democrat elected from that district since 1910—it was built on something much more solid than community-wide disenchantment with, and sense of being betrayed by, the Nixon Administration. And it certainly was brought about by forces other than those blamed by Ford—"labor outsiders."

"I talked to Scammon [Richard Scammon, political analyst] before I took this job and asked if it was likely to be a short-term job," says Thomas Quimby, administrative assistant to VanderVeen. "He said the Fifth District is

a swing district now and that this was obscured by Jerry Ford's incumbency." (Quimby was one of Betty Ford's classmates at Grand Rapids's Central High School [Class of '36], in a well-to-do section of the city.)

"VanderVeen," Quimby notes, "is talking about a campaign budget that would have once been inconceivable for a Democratic candidate—\$100,000. Robert Pew, chairman of the board of Steelcase [the office-furniture firm] is VanderVeen's main supporter. That will give you some idea of what's happening."

"I understand that Ford got up before a group of Grand Rapids businessmen with VanderVeen's contribution list and shrieked: 'You men don't

'[Ford] would give a hungry child his lunch, but he can't understand that when he voted against the hot-lunch program he was taking lunches away from millions of children.'

know what you're doing. You don't know which side your bread is buttered on.'

Nowhere is the fascinating unpredictability of Grand Rapids better observed than in the Fountain Street Church. Its lineage is venerable. The first mission in Grand Rapids was Baptist and the Fountain Street Church was a direct descendant. It used to be affiliated with the Northern Baptists. But 10 years ago they kicked Fountain Street out of the fold. It suited the pastor, Dr. Duncan Littlefair, just fine.

"The name Baptist was as embarrassing to us as we were embarrassing to them," he says. "Now we are totally free." He and his positions, including the promotion of abortion clinics, are "anathema," he says, because "you wouldn't find the same kind of conservatism you find in Grand Rapids anywhere else outside the South."

Dr. Littlefair, who has a Ph.D. in philosophy from the
(Continued on Page 92)

Continued from Page 88

University of Chicago, does not follow what is generally thought of as normal Christianity and avoids using the term in church. Last year he wrote a book, "The Glory Within You," which attempted to unhorse many of the accepted theological precepts. He got seven minutes on the Today Show to plug his book and the result was such an outpouring of anger from Christians across the country that N.B.C. officials quietly investigated to see if they had featured some kind of nut. Littlefair insists: "My church would be considered different even in New York City."

Not long ago, Dr. Littlefair, in a sermon, declared that President Ford had done the right thing in pardoning Nixon and that "absolute justice" was the sort of distasteful thing that could be found only in a place such as Nazi Germany. The congregation gave him a standing ovation. Now there's a swollen rumor going around Grand Rapids that Littlefair was instrumental in convincing Ford to pardon Nixon.

And yet, if the Fountain Street Church is so different, so radical and such an anathema, a visitor might wonder why its membership rolls include so many of Grand Rapids's leaders. Buchen is a member; in fact, he was chairman of the Fountain Street Church's board for a couple of years. He is also said to be the one chiefly responsible for encouraging Dr. Littlefair to write the scandalous book and, after its publication, became its biggest booster. If Ford's economic adviser Seidman goes to church anywhere when he is in Grand Rapids, he goes to Littlefair's church and he contributes to it, steadily. Top officials of both Democratic and Republican parties are members, so are labor executives and some of the most entrenched capitalists of Grand Rapids, as well as some editors and reporters of The Grand Rapids Press.

Still, it is true that politicians who attend Fountain Street sustain a certain liability. Republican Congressional candidate Paul Goebel Jr., for example, has good reason to fear that his membership in the church may drive some conservative Calvinists into the arms of VanderVeen, a Presbyterian. How this kind of thing happens is beyond the probing of outsiders and remains, like the salmon run up the Grand River, something between the local residents and Heaven. ■

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