

The Public Betty Ford

By Donnie Radcliffe
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Betty Bloomer Ford is demonstrating how a dancer's stance can help stave off the fatigue of standing for hours in receiving lines.

In her youth, she wanted to be a concert dancer and studied under such greats as Martha Graham and Doris Humphrey.

She is standing in her memento-cluttered Alexandria living room, her still-lithe figure clad in powder blue slacks and a sheer, semi-see-through blouse. Slacks are an at-home favorite she comes by naturally, she thinks since it was another Bloomer—Amelia, in all probability an ancestor—who invented the divided skirt.

Betty Ford is unaffected but she is not quite the "plain country girl" she claims to be. She is plain-spoken, though, and on occasion, strikingly candid.

Is she aware that there are people in this town who are saying she is, well . . . ?

"Cracking up?" she suggests.

"Oh, yes, I'm aware," she continues, unflustered. "But if I worried about it I wouldn't have time for anything else."

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Mrs. Gerald Ford's schedule is booked solid—"no

*She's booked solid
--and learning
to enjoy it*

openings whatsoever"—with interviews and public appearances.

She said there is no connection at all between her new visibility and the fact that, with the impeachment inquiry nearing a climax, people are increasingly curious to know who Betty Ford is.

Back in the beginning, after Ford was hand-picked by Mr. Nixon as the first Vice President in history to take office under the Twenty-Fifth Amendment, there had been a lot of publicity. Ford said she finally cut it off because she did not want that much attention.

Things obviously have changed now, and as Ford stumps the country in the name of the Republican party, Mr. Ford is doing some low-key stumping.

Three and a half weeks ago, deciding that somebody from the Administration ought to attend the funeral of the murdered Mrs. Martin Luther King Sr., she flew off to Atlanta.

Except for Georgia Governor Jimmy Carter, Mrs. Ford was the only dignitary present not connected with the civil rights movement or black politics.

"Daddy" King, upstairs in his bedroom before the funeral, had put his arms around her, kissed her and told he how grateful his wife would have been.

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With the exception of Ford himself, daughter Susan, was the first member of the family to receive Secret Service protection.

That occurred at the time of the Patty Hearst kidnapping when federal agents moved in after learning that "The daughter of the Vice President" appeared on a Symbionese Liberation Army list.

"They (the SLA) didn't mention Susan by name and they may not have known who the vice president was," according to Mrs. Ford, who now has agents of her own when she requests them.

"But he had to be very quiet about it because the FBI didn't want to lose its contact."

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Betty Ford claims that a move to the White House is something she never thinks about.

"No, I never do. I live from day to day."

Not that she doubts for an instant what kind of a president Jerry Ford would make. He would be "excellent." And she is no longer quite as adamant about his quitting politics at the end of two years, as she once was reported to be.

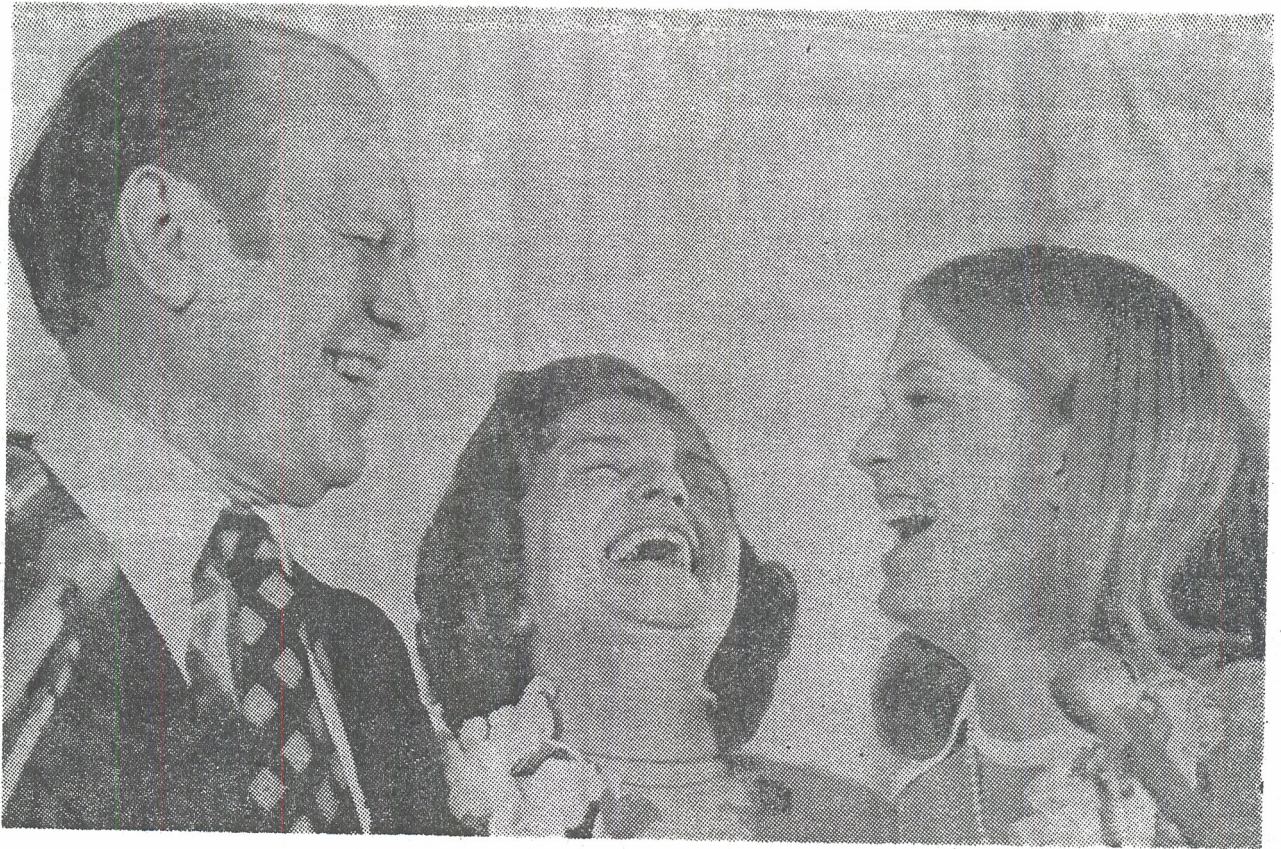
"When you project two years in this political situation we're in now, I don't think it's fair to say what you would or wouldn't do."

Only when it comes to Watergate and the inevitable question which presidential hopefuls will have to answer from now on do her gray-blue eyes turn steely.

Could Watergate happen if Ford were President?

"Oh, no, never, because Jerry has seen Watergate happen and Jerry would never allow himself to be away from what was going on to the point that Watergate could be set up without his knowing it."

None of which should imply that she is not critical of Ford at times. She leaves him "bills and criticism" atop his bedroom bureau



The vice president with Mrs. Ford and daughter Susan: The normal American family?

(not pinned to his pillow with threats of marital reprisals, as some contend) because "he keeps a balance that way," she said.

When she challenges the way Ford may have expressed himself, "it's constructive criticism. He needs it, everybody needs it.

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Betty Ford speaks slowly, sometimes almost haltingly, and she says it's because she chooses her words carefully to convey her precise meaning.

Her speech mannerism has nothing to do with the tranquilizers she takes from time to time, she said.

She uses those when she feels tension coming on "before it has a chance to work itself into a spasm type of thing and then radiate." That happens usually from exhaustion "if I overdo."

She has learned well enough not to be fazed much by Ford's mini-tantrums, thrown on at least three occasions when she arrived late at official functions.

She laughed it off with the explanation that Ford was late for their wedding and she has been making up for it ever since.

The 8½ months since Ford became Vice President have been "quite a revelation" because she said she found out that "I'm much stronger than I realized" was because more demands have been made on me and it hasn't bothered me a bit."



Betty Ford: Not quite