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PAUL and MARGARET GOEBEL

Oral history interview concerning politics in Grand Rapids under the McKay machine, the Home Front, and the early life and political beginnings of Gerald Ford. Goebel was active in local politics and became mayor, 1950-54, 1956-58.

I N T E R V I E W W I T H
Mr. and Mrs. Paul G. Goebel

BY

Dr. Thomas F. Soapes
Oral Historian

on

January 25, 1980

for

G E R A L D R . F O R D L I B R A R Y

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This interview is being conducted with Mr. and Mrs. Paul Goebel in their home in Grand Rapids, Michigan, on January 25, 1980. Present for the interview are Mr. and Mrs. Goebel and Dr. Thomas Soapes.

SOAPES: Are both of you native Michiganders?

MRS. GOEBEL: No, I am Canadian born, American parents, but I have lived in Grand Rapids for fifty-two years.

SOAPES: And were you a native?

MR. GOEBEL: I was born here, Tom, and lived here all my life, seventy-eight years, except for about a year and a half in Wabash, Indiana when I was a youngster.

SOAPES: And you went to The University of Michigan.

MR. GOEBEL: Yes.

SOAPES: And your business interests when you were here?

MR. GOEBEL: I was in the sporting and athletic goods business for about thirty-five years and sold out in '61. Since about 1964 I've been raising funds for The University of Michigan.

SOAPES: What was the first contact you had with Ford?

MR. GOEBEL: When he attended the high school - - of course, we knew his folks - -

SOAPES: What are the principal recollections you have of the traits of Mr. and Mrs. Ford?

MR. GOEBEL: The Senior Fords?

SOAPES: Yes.

MRS. GOEBEL: They were a very fine, wonderful family. Four sons. The mother was a beloved woman who had a great talent for friendship. She was a great loving mother to everyone, and her friends were endless, of all stripes. To illustrate how easily she got along, at Jerry Ford Senior's funeral, General (William C.) Westmoreland came in and she said, "Oh, Westy, I'm so glad to meet you at last." He was just "Westy" to her.

That was typical of her.

Jerry Ford Senior was quite a disciplinarian with the boys. For instance, when they'd be up to our house for dinner and it would be time to change the dinner plates to the dessert plates, Jerry would just look up and the boys automatically got up, cleared the table and assisted with the dessert. They were a very tight-knit family.

MR. GOEBEL: And, of course, Jerry Senior was very active in civic affairs here and also very active in the Republican Party. Matter of fact, he was Chairman of the Kent County Republican Committee for quite some time.

SOAPES: You said he was a disciplinarian. Was he then a stern person to deal with or was he a gregarious, easy to - -

MRS. GOEBEL: Oh, very easy, very easy. Most charming man; they both were delightful people. But there were certain moral codes of conduct he tolerated in others but not in the family. But he was a delightful guest, delightful host, as was Dorothy.

MR. GOEBEL: I'd say they were a very gregarious type.

MRS. GOEBEL: They loved to entertain.

MR. GOEBEL: A great host of friends. Everybody in town knew them. And they were very much beloved, both of them. They were just outstanding individuals.

SOAPES: Of course he was very involved in civic affairs and politics. Were there other hobbies or interests that he had?

MR. GOEBEL: You talking about Jerry Senior?

SOAPES: Yes.

MR. GOEBEL: I don't know as he was much of a sportsman, such as hunting and fishing and things like that. He was more of a family man and worked very, very hard. He had some very difficult years in the paint business, having been through some difficult early times.

His outside interests were civic affairs. He spent much of his time in very many civic, religious, and philanthropic activities. Considered one of Grand Rapids' greatest citizens.

SOAPES: One of the things I note about Jerry Ford Junior is that he mentions religion frequently. He was brought up in this type of a home, frequent church attendance?

MRS. GOEBEL: Yes, indeed.

MR. GOEBEL: Jerry Senior was a deacon in the Episcopal church here.

MRS. GOEBEL: Yes, they were very active in the Episcopal church.

MR. GOEBEL: Both Jerry Senior and Dorothy.

MRS. GOEBEL: And indeed Dorothy died at the church. She was just going into the church services and had a heart attack. She had a history of heart trouble. She was prepared to go. She was deeply religious, but not fanatically so.

SOAPES: Was it a religion worn on the sleeve?

MRS. GOEBEL: They didn't talk religion, they just lived it.

MR. GOEBEL: They weren't the evangelistic type or anything, you know, just good, morally sound people.

SOAPES: How about the relationship between the brothers?

MRS. GOEBEL: That was always very, very close and very protective toward the younger brothers. The two older brothers, Jerry and Tom, were very protective toward the younger brothers. There was always a very close relationship. When Jerry comes home now, the first thing he does is to have a golf game with his brothers and spend much time together.

SOAPES: You were working in the political arena with Jerry Ford Senior at this time. How did you come to get involved in the politics of Grand Rapids?

MR. GOEBEL: That's quite a long story. Back in 1937 or 38 one stormy winter day, Dr. (Willard B.) VerMeulen, a dentist here in town whom you are seeing tomorrow, came into my office for two to three hours and gave me a rundown on the sordid political situation in Grand Rapids, Kent County and in the State of Michigan. He said, "We must destroy the political influence and power of (Frank D.) McKay if the Republican Party is ever to serve the best interests of all the people."

I said, "If you're just 10% correct, I agree with you."

He said, "Let's get a group together and attempt to overcome this political machine."

Just then Jerry Junior came into my office and Dr. VerMeulen repeated his conversation with me. Jerry said, "I'm with you. Let's form the group and get underway."

The net result of this meeting was that in the late 1930's we formed the Republican Home Front which together with the Grand Rapids Non-partisan Citizens Action Committee completely destroyed the influence of the McKay Machine and Jerry was elected to Congress in 1948.

SOAPES: I want to talk a little bit about the mechanics and some of the things that you did in a minute. Some of the things that I've read on McKay indicate that his power and influence was beginning to wane a bit by the early forties because of the indictments and some of the revelations that had come out. Would you agree that his power was beginning to decline already at the time that the "Home Front" began to be formed?

MR. GOEBEL: You are partially correct, Tom, but the Republican Home Front was organized in the late 1930's and through its exposures, contributed to the decline of McKay's political influence.

There were many so-called good and prominent citizens of this city and state who found nothing wrong about McKay's activities for various reasons of their own. They may have benefited and cashed in on some of the political influence that McKay had to offer. Much of this picture was brought to public light and these so-called friends gradually withdrew their association and support from the political machine.

SOAPES: Were elections here in Grand Rapids on a party line basis, or was it non-partisan?

MR. GOEBEL: Non-partisan. But a political boss or political machine is involved with all things political - both partisan and non-partisan - wherever a power base of influence may be obtained.

SOAPES: Your group was primarily Republican but you did pull in Democrats?

MR. GOEBEL: Yes, indeed. Many highly respected Democrats, all cognizant of the political situation here, joined with us in our efforts to improve the political atmosphere. Also, many citizens who had no particular political affiliation joined with us.

Mrs. Dorothy Judd (the wife of Siegel Judd, a highly respected attorney) who had been as I recall one-time President of the city, state and national League of Women Voters, and attorney Julius Amberg, Democrat and former Secretary of Army, initiated and organized Citizens' Action (non-partisan). This organization and the Republican Front cooperated closely to destroy the power and influence of the then political machine.

SOAPES: Now what were some of the tactics, the approach that you took in expanding your political base?

MR. GOEBEL: The beginning of all political power lies at the local level. The Republican Home Front was successful in obtaining politically like-minded candidates to run for the office of precinct delegate. Our selected candidates won in sufficient numbers to control the County Convention, to oust the machine chairman, and to elect one of our finest citizens, attorney Fred Wetmore, as Chairman of the Kent County Republican Committee.

SOAPES: So you started working at the precinct level, the party committee and the party structure is what you went for. Can you give me some idea of a profile of people who joined with you? Were they the business interests, church people, educators, what type of people?

MR. GOEBEL: People from every walk of life. All interested, as good citizens, dedicated to making our community a better place in which to live.

Citizens Action was organized as a non-partisan group dedicated to the very same objective and was interested in improving our local non-partisan government, at that time largely under the control of the Republican machine.

Citizens Action initiated a huge public mass meeting of roughly 20,000 citizens in the downtown area at Fulton Street Park (now Veterans Park) at which several prominent and very respected citizens spoke about the sordid political situation at City Hall. This rally led to petitions to recall the mayor and some of the city commissioners.

Mayor George W. Welsh resigned before the recall election.

SOAPES: Didn't he resign while he was in Europe?

MR. GOEBEL: Yes, while attending a meeting of the International Conference of Mayors.

MR. GOEBEL: Following the successful recall election, the two local newspapers both printed coupons in their papers asking the electorate:

"Whom do you wish for your mayor?" and

"Whom do you wish as your City Commissioner?"

None of us who led this poll were interested in public office, but very dedicated to destroying the influence of the political machine.

We got together for many hours, into the wee hours of the morning, and finally decided to make the run. The Citizens Action slate was in City Hall! That was the end of the machine!

SOAPES: What role did Jerry Ford Senior play in your "Home Front" organization?

MR. GOEBEL: He was very sympathetic to our efforts, but being Chairman of the County Republican Party, he could not take sides publicly.

SOAPES: But was he able to do some things "unpublicly?"

MR. GOEBEL: Yes indeed, because he was very well known, very popular, and had a host of friends who were very sympathetic to whatever he stood for.

SOAPES: So, it was a case where, he sort of let it be known where his sympathies were without making a public splash about it and that helped bring other people along.

MR. GOEBEL: That is exactly correct. He greatly helped the cause by privately talking with all his friends, informing them of exactly what the real situation was. If Jerry Senior says, "That's the way it is, that's good enough for me!" He was very, very helpful in bringing about the up-setting of the political machine.

SOAPES: How was he able to get to this position of influence with McKay having his power?

MR. GOEBEL: Because Jerry Senior was probably the most well-known and respected citizen of this community. The political machine's power was beginning to fade and McKay could not afford to buck such a popular person as Jerry Senior.

SOAPES: Did McKay actively try to oppose him to get rid of him?

MRS. GOEBEL: McKay always worked behind the scene, never openly. His henchmen carried out his political machinations.

MR. GOEBEL: McKay was finally indicted. As I recall this indictment concerned the sale of the State's Bluewater Bridge (between Port Huron and Canada) Bonds, but he was acquitted.

After his acquittal, I was reliably told that McKay requested some of his friends to put on a dinner in his honor, to restore his prestige. Many of these so-called friends were individuals who had profited from their association with McKay.

SOAPES: Were you able to get some equally prominent people here in town to work with you.

MR. GOEBEL: Yes, indeed. By that time McKay's shenanigans became pretty well known.

SOAPES: Were these people who had been injured by McKay?

MR. GOEBEL: Undoubtedly there were some. However, by this point in time, there had come to the attention of the general populace, sufficient evidence of the machine's past activities, so that McKay's political power and influence were on the wane.

SOAPES: I want to talk a little bit about the political landscape here, the ethnic divisions of Grand Rapids. There's a lot of the Dutch influence here. Are there other groups that are identifiable in Grand Rapids?

MRS. GOEBEL: They are less identifiable now, but during that time, the Dutch were very prominent in this fight and were, indeed, a strong arm in the fight. But as the Polish-Lithuanian groups became cognizant of the political situation, they came along with us.

MR. GOEBEL: I had indicated earlier in this interview that Julius Amberg was former Secretary of the Army, but now wish to correct myself. He was Special Assistant to the Secretary of War 1941-1945. He was also one of this city's most highly respected lawyers and a fine citizen.

Mrs. Dorothy Judd and he were greatly responsible for the success enjoyed by "Citizens Action".

The Polish-Lithuanian originally went along with McKay because of his favors, etc., bestowed upon them - the usual machine perks.

SOAPES: But the Dutch population was separate from this group; they had not come under McKay's influence?

MR. GOEBEL: I would say a few Dutch people who were prominent in town and who had benefited from their acquaintance with the political boss. But it came to the point where they could no longer be publicly identified with the political machine.

Because of the publicity given to the activities of the "Republican Home Front" and "Citizens Action" it got to the point where individuals could not afford to be publicly identified with McKay.

SOAPES: This group then that came out against McKay, was this a more affluent group than the people who continued to side with McKay?

MR. GOEBEL: By and large, I'd have to say "yes". I'd say also that they were largely more informed about the activities of the political machine.

SOAPES: But the grass roots voters, the Polish group, that continued to vote with McKay, was this a lower economic group?

MR. GOEBEL: Largely, yes.

SOAPES: It was a group that could be manipulated more easily, perhaps, because of their economic situation.

MR. GOEBEL: Influenced, yes.

SOAPES: Did Jerry Ford, Junior play any role in the Republican Home Front" before he went into military service?

MR. GOEBEL: Yes, indeed, a very active part. He regularly attended meetings and took a very active part in our discussions and actions. He became a most dedicated disciple for good government. After his return from service in the navy in World War II, the members of the "Home Front" unanimously invited him to run for the U.S. Congress against the incumbent (1948) offering him their complete support.

After much discussion with his family, his law firm partners and his close friends, he finally enthusiastically consented - and won the election!

SOAPES: You said you had known him from his earliest days. Did he show any interest in politics as a youngster?

MR. GOEBEL: I was not aware of any particular interest until he became active in "Home Front". He certainly became actively interested then.

SOAPES: Were there, at this time, prominent families of Grand Rapids who had been here since the beginning of the town?

MR. GOEBEL: I'm not sure since the beginning of the town but certainly many could be designated as "old" families of Grand Rapids. One such was the John W. Blodgett family. John was very active in the Republican party and at one time was the State of Michigan's Republican National Committeeman

Mr. Oscar Waer, Blodgett's legal counsel, was most helpful in acquainting Mr. Blodgett with the machine's sordid activities, after which Mr. Blodgett assisted the "Home Front" and the "Citizens Action" in their fight against the machine.

MRS. GOEBEL: I would say that we have a community of individuals with high moral character and concern who are perfectly willing to put themselves on public record when they become acquainted with the facts.

Mrs. Judd's father was a City Commissioner for some time during the period McKay enjoyed his political influence, but soon discovered the McKay influence in city politics and joined in destroying the machine's political influence.

SOAPES: So it was a combination of some good old-fashioned organization work at the grass roots, precinct level along with the influence of some people like Jerry Ford, Senior as the Republican Chairman, plus a few of these old families much more subtly working to help bring support to you.

MR. GOEBEL: Yes, plus many other dedicated citizens.

SOAPES: What types of arguments did you use when dealing with the voters when it came election time, to work an anti-McKay campaign?

MR. GOEBEL: Both daily newspapers gave news space to the activities of the "Home Front" and "Citizens Action" through news coverage and editorially. But it also took much advance time and hard spade work by individuals of both organizations to bring their objectives to a final successful conclusion.

Mayor George Welsh published a weekly, "The Shopping News" distributed, free, house to house.

McKay published a weekly, "The Michigan Times", through subscription, but much of the time, free, printed by Welsh Printing Co.

As time went on, the two daily newspapers frequently indirectly challenged the editorial contents of both weeklies, much to the enlightenment of their many subscribers.

SOAPES: How active was McKay in that first primary that Ford ran in against Jonkman?

MR. GOEBEL: It would be very difficult, indeed, to discover what McKay was up to behind the scenes, but you can bet your bottom dollar he badly wanted Jonkman to be elected and directed his efforts thusly. But by that time the good people of this community were "catching on".

SOAPES: Did McKay make any overtures after Ford won the election?

MR. GOEBEL: None of which I am aware, but I am certain that by that time he fully realized the ball game was over; and he also realized fully that Jerry, Junior could never be compromised. McKay would have been up against some real moral fibre.

SOAPES: Let's see, Welsh was still around then?

MR. GOEBEL: Yes. Jerry, Junior was elected in '48. However, as said earlier, Welsh resigned in 1949 before the recall election.

SOAPES: When Ford is elected in '48, he goes to Congress, he has to then maintain his political fences back here. How do you remember him acting toward his constituents? How frequent was he back here? What did he do to keep his flag waving back in Grand Rapids?

MR. GOEBEL: He was a "master politician" in a real sense of the word. He immediately wrote personally to every person in the district who had had anything to do with his election.

He answered every single person who had ever written him about a particular problem, at the same time doing whatever he morally could to be helpful. If he could not meet their requests, he would be very honest with them, and take time to inform them why he could not.

Whenever he'd come back home, he'd get in his motor trailer, travel around the district and visit with anyone and everyone, from all walks of life, who had a problem or complaint. Whenever he could get away from the work of Congress, he'd come. Everyone loved him!

Shortly after he became Vice President, a local reception was given Betty and him in the Grand Rapids City Hall. At the head receiving line was Goebel, Jerry Junior, Betty Ford and Cal (Mrs. Goebel). The lineup of friends, from all over the district and the state, extended outside the City Hall onto the huge plaza in front of City Hall. Hundreds and hundreds of friends and admirers - on a very, very cold day in a snow storm - waiting to visit with Betty and Jerry! It was a sight to behold!

But even more interesting and startling was to hear Jerry greet his friends by their first names and recall previous contacts with most everyone of the huge group assembled!

As I recall, it took over two hours before the last friend gave his greeting. It was an amazing and unforgettable experience!

SOAPES: Did he continue to keep tabs on local politics here and play any role in local elections?

MR. GOEBEL: He could not be very active locally because of his duties in Washington. However, he was always available to us for his sound advice and counsel. He remained intensely interested in the local political situation.

MRS. GOEBEL: Jerry felt that the political situation was in safe hands with Dr. Ver Meulen, and Paul as Mayor. (Laughter)

MR. GOEBEL: The machine was licked!

MRS. GOEBEL: Through Fred Meyers, Jerry's administrative assistant in Washington and one of the finest persons I have ever known, Jerry was in constant close touch with the political situation in Grand Rapids - partisan and non-partisan.

SOAPES: Did you have occasion as mayor to call him in an official capacity to request his assistance to the city?

MR. GOEBEL: No, only for advice and counsel.

SOAPES: During the fifties there were some rumors about the Michigan Republicans who were interested in him as a state-wide candidate, particularly for Governor.

MR. GOEBEL: And U.S. Senator.

SOAPES: How serious were those approaches and how interested do you think he was in them?

MR. GOEBEL: My understanding was that he showed little interest. At that time, he felt he should stay in Congress and perform the work for which he had been elected. He, at no time, exhibited great personal political ambitions.

MRS. GOEBEL: However, after having some service and experience in the House he was interested in becoming Speaker of the House.

SOAPES: Do you remember any time during his congressional service when there was any serious challenge to him or any serious question of his services as Congressman for this area?

MR. GOEBEL: No, I do not. His following included many Democrats. He had great bi-partisan support. The 5th Congressional District had for years been a bastion of Republicanism.

SOAPES: You mentioned earlier when he became Vice-President, the reception that he got down here. Was this area surprised that he was chosen Vice-President?

MRS. GOEBEL: We were surprised at the brilliance of Nixon to bring this about.

SOAPES: Didn't your brother serve as City Manager of Grand Rapids?

MR. GOEBEL: Yes, but after three or four years in that position, Mayor Welsh engineered Frank's firing as City Manager. Frank had worked for the city ever since the end of his military service in World War I. He had worked his way through city civil service to become City Engineer and then around 1946, as I recall, was appointed City Manager by the City Commission.

SOAPES: Why would the City Commission appoint him City Manager knowing your affiliation with the "Home Front" and "Citizens Action"?

MR. GOEBEL: I presume because he was generally recognized as a very qualified and popular man for the job. This appointment took place about 1946, before "Citizens Action" came into being. His firing was one of the sparks which ignited the formation of "Citizens Action".

Under the City Charter, the City Manager is charged with the responsibility of appointing the City Assessor subject to confirmation of the City Commission.

For many years previously, there had been several complaints about the unfairness of assessing property, indicating that many of McKay's political "friends" were given preferential treatment. Too many complaints were found to be justified.

About 1949, because of death or retirement, a new City Assessor had to be appointed. Frank Goebel appointed a very highly qualified assessor, at that time, the assessor of the City of Ann Arbor, Michigan. Mayor Welsh and the City Commission refused to confirm this appointment because of their desire to appoint a completely unqualified friend of McKay's. Goebel could not conscientiously go along with such an appointment, was asked to resign by Welsh, refused, and was fired. Shortly after that came the public mass meeting, the resulting recall election - and the complete demise of the political machine!