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NIEL A. WEATHERS

Oral history interview concerning his law work with Gerald Ford 1946-48, his participation in the 1948 congressional campaign, and his association with Ford thereafter.

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Niel A. Weathers
Donor

Aug. 12, 1980
Date

Acting James E. O'Neill
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August 22, 1980
Date

This interview is being conducted with Mr. Niel Weathers at his office in Grand Rapids, Michigan on January 28, 1980. The interviewer is Dr. Thomas Soapes. Present for the interview are Mr. Weathers and Dr. Soapes.

SOAPES: Mr. Weathers, are you a native of this area?

WEATHERS: No, I came here in 1946 from New Jersey.

SOAPES: And you've been practicing law here ever since then.

WEATHERS: Yes.

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

WEATHERS: Well, I was hired by Butterfield, Keeney, and Amberg approximately six months after Jerry Ford had been hired by them. He started work in about February '46, and I was here in May -- maybe it was a little earlier.

SOAPES: Phil Buchen was in that firm too, wasn't he?

WEATHERS: Yes. Phil was a partner. Jerry and I were associates, hired staff attorneys.

SOAPES: What were the principal characteristics of Ford as a person that you recall?

WEATHERS: Friendly, energetic, and hard working. That guy would get down here at seven in the morning or earlier. He knew everybody in town. He was most friendly to me. I came out here as a bachelor and a stranger in the area, and he was a good friend. He took me around with him and, incidently, involved me in the Republican county committee fairly early in the game. He was very active in community affairs and in Republican politics, meetings, committees, fund drives, "Young Man of the Year" once for the Junior Chamber of Commerce.

SOAPES: Now Phil Buchen, how did he strike you?

WEATHERS: Well, Phil was then a partner, the youngest partner of the three, and a tremendously able young lawyer.

SOAPES: Was the firm involved in the general practice of law or did they have a specialty?

WEATHERS: Well, it didn't have a specialty but there were some things that it did not do much of such as personal injury litigation, divorces, criminal work, no patent work. But you might call it a general business practice. Julius Amberg was a very good litigator, commercial cases.

SOAPES: And Ford's activities, did it mirror the firm or did he tend to go to one type of case?

WEATHERS: Well, he was somewhat independent. He built an independent practice of his own within the firm, and he dealt directly with a lot of clients. And being a young man, they tended to be small clients.

SOAPES: What kind of a reputation did he have as a litigator?

WEATHERS: Well, he had only been here a few months when I came so he didn't have any reputation. Now as he went on he handled some court work, but I wouldn't say that was his reputation. He was just an all-round lawyer on pretty much an independent practice of his own within the firm. Not that he didn't help. He was assigned to help on some work of Mr. Amberg's and Buchen's, wrote memoranda. I

remember him giving me some help on how to structure memoranda for the firm, how they liked to do it.

SOAPES: You said that he began to get you involved in Republican politics. Was this going to meetings, or did you get involved in some of the leg work of politics?

WEATHERS: Well, he had a lot of that too. He took me to meetings, and there was a vacancy on the county committee and he got me appointed to fill it. I can't remember going to any meetings, but I can remember pounding the streets and ringing door bells.

SOAPES: Doing some canvassing?

WEATHERS: Right. That might have come a little later, I can't remember. But Jerry was a very enthusiastic, warm magnetic guy. And if he said, "Let's do this," or "Would you like to help me?" your immediate tendency was to say yes until you got in so deep you had to call a halt to it. So I didn't go on with politics; it wasn't my particular bent.

SOAPES: Did you get involved with any of the "Home Front" activities that were working against the [Frank D.] McKay machine?

WEATHERS: The "Home Front" group were in the saddle by the time I arrived; so they were the county committee essentially. McKay had been defeated and the "Home Front" was Paul Goebel, Jerry Ford, Senior, Dr. Bill Ver Meulen - - they were the top influential people in the county organization.

SOAPES: Did you have much personal contact with Jerry Ford, Senior?

WEATHERS: Yes, quite a bit. I visited in their home and after Jerry went to Washington I kind of inherited the Ford Paint and Varnish Company work. He was still the president, Mr. Ford, Senior. Yes, I felt I knew them quite well. We were members of the same church, Grace Church, Episcopal.

SOAPES: What were the principal traits of Ford, Senior that you recall.

WEATHERS: Stern looking man, very good-hearted, friendly man, very much respected in the community, public spirited, good churchman, moderately successful businessman. Company ran for years after that, Ford paint business. Tom Ford was the president after his father died. Then when he went to Lansing, Dick Ford became the president, and more recently it has been sold to some larger organization.

SOAPES: What about the other people who were the leaders of the "Home Front," Dr. Ver Meulen, how did he strike you?

WEATHERS: Well, to me he was just a friendly guy who was much respected. From what I heard about him he had a lot of guts. He had great courage in the early stages when he tackled McKay and his organization. I don't remember him as being chairman of the county committee, he may have been, just a very much respected veteran of the war -- the war with McKay.

SOAPES: Were they still carrying the torch of the campaign against McKay?

WEATHERS: Oh yes, a lot of people were. Some of the old McKay henchmen were still around -- the congressman, Bartel Jonkman, was a McKay man and some few functionaries in the county government. So there was a strong feeling, it was that recent.

SOAPES: And when elections came along, the McKay image was still something they were still battling against?

WEATHERS: Oh yes. In fact, McKay was fighting back at about that time. He was trying to regain his control of the county committee, I guess, or county convention. And it was some friends among returning veterans that set up a rival organization, canvassed and organized and tried to win elections -- didn't really succeed.

SOAPES: There was another reform group, the "Citizen's Action," that Mrs. Siegel Judd was involved in.

WEATHERS: Yes. Julius Amberg was the head of that. I think they made him the head after they'd kicked off the battle for the city government. George Welsh and his crew, a big blowup over the appointment of assessors, tax assessors for the city. Welsh was very insistent on his man. And there was suspicion or evidence that it was being used to reward friends and punish enemies of the old organization. So it was made a big issue, and I guess they thought Welsh and his majority of the city commission and some of the improprieties in regard to this appointment, made an issue of it and campaigned for the mayor's office. Paul Goebel won and was in for a term or two as a reform mayor. There was litigation

that went to the Michigan supreme court, one aspect of it. I think Welsh sued to have his man appointed or have his action recognized or something, I can't remember. That's when Julius Amberg was asked to come in and head the group and he did, and his main function was this law suit. This was all after Jerry was gone. As I remember, it was '48 and '49.

SOAPES: Right, '49 was the recall on the mayor. Was the law firm that you were with known as a political law firm?

WEATHERS: No, it was not. See Jerry was a very active Republican. Julius Amberg was a well-known Democrat, although he never ran for office. But Julius endorsed Jerry in his campaign for congressman. In spite of the fact that he valued his standing as a Democrat, he had enough faith in Jerry that he publicly endorsed him. He backed him up too on the -- do you know the incident about the campaign headquarters?

SOAPES: Yes.

WEATHERS: Julius backed him on that. I can remember him saying, "Fred Schoeck of Wurzburgs called me and said to tell Jerry to pull off that lot. But if Jerry doesn't want to do it, I'm not going to do it. We might lose Wurzburg as a client but I don't really think so; they have other reasons for keeping us." So he stood his ground, and we didn't lose Wurzburg. Julius was not a man to back away from a fight.

SOAPES: Did you get involved in Ford's campaign in '48?

WEATHERS: Well, I think my function was to dig out information. I can remember studying census figures in the library and distribution of population. There was a group of young men, we used to meet in the University Club and parcel out work and take on projects.

SOAPES: So you were doing some background research, classifying areas of the city for the campaign.

WEATHERS: Trying to furnish useful information to him in planning his campaign: How many farmers are there in Ottawa County? How many people live in the cities, like that.

SOAPES: Were you just giving him raw data, or were you trying to intrepret this into strategy?

WEATHERS: Interpret.

SOAPES: Do you recall suggesting strategy to him: Here's a group of farmers out here. You could make this kind of appeal to them.

WEATHERS: Well, the only thing I remember on that - - Ottawa County was regarded as agricultural and the figures showed that the majority lived in the cities. That was the sort of question we needed to have the answer to.

SOAPES: What I recall from what I've learned about the McKay machine was that it was very strong with the east European ethnic elements around Grand Rapids, the Lithuanian, Polish elements. The Dutch, however, were somewhat outside the orbit. Was this some-

thing that Ford was able to play on, build a base in the Dutch community?

WEATHERS: Well, I don't know the answer to that. It may be true; it sounds reasonable. McKay was strong on the west side which is Polish and European and Lithuanian. Jonkman was strictly Dutch. Jerry had VerMeulen, Milanowski, and probably Wally Waalkes, later a judge. So I don't really know that you could divide it on those ethnic lines.

SOAPES: Did Ford discuss his decision to run with you?

WEATHERS: No.

SOAPES: Do you know who it was that he might have discussed that decision with?

WEATHERS: He was very close to Jack Stiles, and Jack managed his campaign. I would guess he would, I don't know.

SOAPES: I think Phil Buchen was the one who had put him on to Jack Stiles.

WEATHERS: I don't know whether he was or not. They were all members of the DKE [Delta Kappa Epsilon] fraternity, University of Michigan. Jerry was a little older, couple years older than Phil. The Stiles brothers, I guess, were contemporaries of Phil's, so that could be so. But the Stiles were an old Grand Rapids family too, and it may have come about that way.

SOAPES: One pattern that I've noticed in talking with people about both the "Home Front" campaign as well as Ford's is

old-line, respected families, that this was a strategy that they seemed to employ, getting some major community names on their list of supporters. Was this a conscious strategy they seemed to be following of getting some good old-line names behind us.

WEATHERS: I don't know, Tom. Jerry had a pretty broad base of support. I remember he used to like to go out to Kent City and Sparta because he had lots of good friends there, the Saur's and influential country people. Jerry had contacts in the black community, had some black clients, whom I inherited from him when he left. He cultivated that, he cultivated everywhere and I suppose the leading families, I just wasn't conscious of this being the main objective of the campaign, and the "Home Front" campaign, of course, was before I arrived here.

SOAPES: That's interesting that he had built himself a base throughout the community with blacks and with other ethnic groups as part of his law practice.

WEATHERS: I really think that Jerry had political ambitions from the earliest time I knew him, and his law practice was a means to an end. And he did very much cultivate a very broad variety of people, geographically and economically and socially. He was a very gregarious, friendly guy. I've never seen a fellow more at ease with all kinds of people.

SOAPES: Then after the campaign, you kept up a personal friendship with him, didn't you?

WEATHERS: Yes, to the extent you can with a person in Congress. Jerry kept a place in the firm, and when we young fellows were admitted to the partnership he asked to be admitted too, in case he should lose his election or for some reason want to come back to law practice. So he was nominally a partner in the firm for several years, although he didn't do any work or draw any compensation. When he came back I tried to visit with him; he had a pretty busy time and sometimes he'd have dinner with us out at the home, out at the beach in the summer. Jerry, he was just great with his relations with people. My wife and I went down to Washington to hear the argument in a Supreme Court case we were interested in, took our young son with us. I wrote to Jerry several weeks before saying we were coming down and I would like to drop in and see him. We got down there and we were busy and we didn't make a contact and I got a call at my hotel. Jerry had traced back to here and gotten my address where I was staying and called me at the hotel and took my family to lunch at the House restaurant. But Jerry was so very busy and such a worker that you had to share just small pieces of his time.

SOAPES: Do you remember of him commenting on his reaction to being a congressman, to the job, of things that surprised him or things that he didn't like about the job?

WEATHERS: No, I think he loved it from the word go. I think he was one of the first to have a mobile office that would go

around the district and spend a few days here and there. I think he may have been one of the first to send out a newsletter to his constituents. Everybody does it now, but he started it right early.

SOAPES: Do you remember what the local press reaction to his service was? Did he get a lot of press coverage once he was in office?

WEATHERS: We had two newspapers at the time, the Grand Rapids Herald and Grand Rapids Press. I think the Press endorsed him for nomination to congress. I don't think they always agreed with his votes, or what he did -- Jerry was pretty much a conservative, party-line Republican. He took some positions that the press didn't go along with -- this is a general recollection, I can't name the specifics. He was, of course, in the minority party when Truman was in office. He was outspoken in the attacks on Dean Acheson and some of the Truman administration actions which the local Democrats didn't like, including Julius Amberg. And there were other things they did like.

SOAPES: Did Amberg continue to support him when he came back for re-election?

WEATHERS: Amberg died in January of '51. I don't know what position he took in the 1950 election. It wasn't open or active I guess. I would guess that Julius went back to his regular Democratic affiliation. He helped Jerry get in, and I don't think he felt he had to stay in the Republican ranks any more.

SOAPES: Did you get to know Betty Ford very well?

WEATHERS: Not well. When they were engaged I remember being out with them one evening and seeing them around. I had not known her before. She was always a very gracious hostess. That time we were in Washington, Jerry was busy and she was really the hostess of the luncheon. Came all the way in from Alexandria, busy as she was. I knew her by reputation. She was a Grand Rapids girl and my friends and my wife had known her when she was young. So I feel as though I know her, but personally, I've had very little contact with her.

SOAPES: Do you recall anytime during his service in congress that he was in any sort of hot water back home? Controversies, problems, questions raised that were in any way threatening to his standing?

WEATHERS: I don't think so, Tom. There was a big challenge to him after he had been in about three terms by a Democrat. I've forgotten who they ran, but the UAW [United Auto Workers] and the unions got strongly behind some candidate in the area - - Bob Kleiner, I can't remember who. And they weren't able to dislodge him - - he rolled up a better vote than before. You might call it a threat but it never did succeed.

SOAPES: He kept his fences very well mended throughout his tenure?

WEATHERS: Immensely popular guy. And he did a lot in serving

individual constituents. His office staff was very good about helping people who had trouble with the government. Everybody does that now too, but Jerry did it particularly effectively. I think maybe if there had been a threat the only real basis would have been that he was too conservative. This area has been now labeled Republican for a long time, sometimes Democrat, like when [Richard] Vander Veen made it. Michigan as a whole is Democrat, in spite of Governor [William] Milliken. So they don't like conservative Republicans like Jerry Ford. They don't dislike him as a man, but they would have liked to beat him, I'm sure. And the press, it tried to be more liberal or middle of the road, so it takes issue sometimes and I'm sure they took issue with a lot of Jerry's stands. This is my general impression.

SOAPES: Several times during the '50s I've noticed in reading some of the newspaper clippings that it was suggested that Ford run for the Senate or run for governor.

WEATHERS: Yes, I remember.

SOAPES: Did that get much attention or cause much excitement?

WEATHERS: Well not among people like me who weren't in the intra-party counsels. Republicans badly needed a vote-getting candidate for those offices. So they would have really liked to have Jerry. I thought he was very wise not to -- he had it made in the House of Representatives. And Jerry was not a rich man.

I don't know how a guy can run for senator unless he's a rich man or he's got a ready made fund-raising organization. Jerry lived very modestly.

SOAPES: Did your personal relationship grow closer to him as the years went on?

WEATHERS: No, more distant. Jerry got busier and busier and he was raising a family in Washington. But I never felt any estrangement when he's been here, you know, he's always been most friendly. Then I have some reluctance to impose on the time of a man like that unless I've got some good reason to.

SOAPES: Do you remember the reaction of the local community here when he moved up to leadership positions in the House of Representatives? Many times other people, as they move up, tend to come under more criticism at home of spending too much time in Washington - - they are a national figure and not paying too much attention at home. Did that question begin to arise?

WEATHERS: Not aware of anything like it. As far as I know he still served his constituents in the same way. He had a good staff at his local office and a good staff in Washington.

SOAPES: The reaction here when Nixon appointed him Vice-President, what was the general reaction around here?

WEATHERS: Well, kind of hard to believe that the local boy could go so high. Not really surprising, we knew about his friendship with Nixon. We could see the political reasons for choosing him and sure were glad to have an honest man in there.

SOAPES: Was there some reaction like: Jerry's a nice guy but he's getting too close with that guy Nixon about whom we have a lot of questions?

WEATHERS: No, I can't really remember anything about that. It didn't bother me because I knew that Jerry was friendly with everybody and they'd served in congress together. One of Jerry's big attitudes was loyalty to his friends.

SOAPES: Then when he's elevated to the Presidency, a lot of the national press reacted: Here is a guy who has never won an election outside of two county congressional district - -

WEATHERS: Never lost an election either.

SOAPES: And he's generally thought of as not too bright in Washington - -

WEATHERS: Is that the way they thought of him?

SOAPES: That's the way that a lot of the press began to characterize it. They brought up the old Lyndon Johnson quote, "He played football too long with his helmet off."

WEATHERS: Yes, I remember that.

SOAPES: And they began to talk about Grand Rapids as a very small kind of isolated place, not very cosmopolitan.

WEATHERS: I came from the East so I know the attitude.

SOAPES: I was wondering how the local community here responded to those kind of comments.

WEATHERS: Well, there was tremendous pride. Signs were

all over at the airport, freeway, Gerald Ford Building - - "This is the home of Jerry Ford." I guess the feeling of people I had contact with was that Jerry might not be the greatest idea man, but he was the guy who could get things done. He could put things across. He knew people; he knew how to organize people and get them to work together. I think people had great faith in the staff, the people who advised him, Phil Buchen, Bill Seidman - - local people we knew - - and of course the Washington people who we knew by reputation. I think Jerry was great on tapping resources of the right kind and making decisions and then making them work.

SOAPES: Once, he was out of the presidency he decided not to move back here and instead moved to Southern California. Was the local community upset about that move?

WEATHERS: I wouldn't say upset. It would have been nice if he had come back and yet with Betty's health problems, we could see the reason. And this was the reason, it was for Betty's health.