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**DOROTHY L. JUDD**

Oral history interview on politics in Grand Rapids under the McKay machine, especially the work of the League of Women Voters and Citizens Action.

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Mrs Dorothy L. Judd.  
Donor

August 5, 1980  
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August 14, 1980  
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This interview is being conducted with Mrs. Dorothy L. Judd in her home in Grand Rapids, Michigan on January 27, 1980. The interviewer is Dr. Thomas Soapes. Present for the interview are Dr. Soapes and Mrs. Judd.

SOAPES: How did you get involved in politics here in Grand Rapids?

MRS. JUDD: My family have always been active in the community -- my mother, my father, my grandfather. It's just a tradition in the family to take some responsibility in the community. As far as the party is concerned, I've never been a strong party person. The League of Women Voters has been my great interest since the 1920s. I served as president of the local and state league and as a director on the national board of the League of Women Voters. So most of my approach to governmental affairs has been on nonpartisan issues. However, I am a Republican, and I was elected as a Republican to the state constitutional convention and served always in the Republican political caucus on that convention.

SOAPES: What year was that?

MRS. JUDD: Nineteen sixty one and two. I continue to keep up my membership in the party, but I have many disagreements with party people.

SOAPES: Your activities in the League of Women Voters you said started back in the twenties. What kind of activities was the League involved in at that time.

MRS. JUDD: Almost as many things as it is today. We got the first federal aid law through with aid for maternal and infant welfare.

I worked on that in the early twenties. And I think we were chiefly responsible for the amendment in '28 that changed the terms of congress and the presidency. We were interested in international affairs. We were trying to get the World Court accepted and we had Manley O. Hudson, professor international law at Harward.

(Hudson later wrote the definitive history of the World Court and was himself appointed judge of that court in 1935.) So that's the kind of thing we did in the twenties.

SOAPES: Did you have any contact with Julia Lathrop in the work at the League?

MRS. JUDD: Yes, Julia Lathrop's work as head of the Children's Bureau under President Wilson had a great influence on our concern for juvenile justice. And locally we began work then on conditions in the Children's Home and its administration by the Probate Court. Here we first met the power of Frank McKay.

I was on the national board in 1931 to '33 and I was head of their department of what we then called "Efficiency in Government." We worked on permanent registration for Michigan when I was in the Michigan league, got that passed. There were all aspects of the League's work I was interested in.

SOAPES: The [Frank D.] McKay machine, of course, was operating here in the twenties and thirties.

MRS. JUDD: Yes, he came into power in the late twenties in the

state government, and we fought him then. I say we - - it was a citizens' organization. See, Grand Rapids is nonpartisan government so we had this nonpartisan citizens' organization to investigate city manager [George] Welsh's handling of relief during the depression. He had some good new ideas about the handling of relief, but everybody was suspicious that McKay was profiting by it. So this brought about a fight against Welsh at that time in the early thirties.

SOAPES: In what way did you think McKay was profiting?

MRS. JUDD: Principally through the food and construction by work relief. Welsh had a central food store. I can't remember the details any more but there was a chance there to make some money.

SOAPES: This was a food store where the welfare recipients would be likely to be - -

MRS. JUDD: They had to go down to one central store to get it and then they had to walk home with their welfare bags. And that was a very insulting thing to those people. And then we had two public improvement projects both reservoirs, going on at that time, one under the work relief program of Welsh's and the other under the regular private employment method. So it was a good chance to compare the costs, and of course the work relief job proved to be the more costly.

SOAPES: When did you start organizing and working in the operations to try to undo McKay's machinery?

MRS. JUDD: We tried to change the city commission to eliminate his control of the commissioners. And my father was elected to the commission at that time from the Third ward. At the same time Manager Welsh was forced to resign and the new commission had to make a drastic move to reassure the public about welfare. So it appointed L. A. Cornelius, a prominent and highly respected citizen, president of a large industry, to give six months without pay to reforming the system. But McKay kept the majority control; so the reform government only had about a year to operate before the commission went back into the hands of the machine.

SOAPES: This would have been about what year?

MRS. JUDD: Thirty-three and four, right in there.

SOAPES: So it was just a temporary setback for McKay and he came back.

MRS. JUDD: Yes. In the meantime, of course, he was becoming so strong in the state government.

SOAPES: Now I understand from some of the other people I've talked to that his power was centered in the immigrant precincts of the town.

MRS. JUDD: Well, yes. In fact there was always a rumor that he was Polish, I don't know.

SOAPES: I've heard the rumor that either he was Polish or that he was Lithuanian. [Laughter]

MRS. JUDD: Anyway I think in those days, it was natural where

you have wards for nationalities or races to unite and that's a place to build political power. (You see, our city charter, written in 1916, had provided for election at-large and the city remained in control of the Citizens League of that era until George Welsh got the charter amended in 1923 to provide for three wards.) I don't think McKay ever got very far with the Dutch.

Oh, I had another opportunity - - you told me you were coming to talk about Ford, now you've got me talking about McKay.

SOAPES: Well, we'll get to Ford - - I was just leading up to it.

MRS. JUDD: Do you want me to go on with McKay?

SOAPES: Sure.

MRS. JUDD: Well, the state was getting in such terrible condition with his control. He had the complete power of appointment over all the state employees, appointment and dismissal. And it was costly. Finally Professor James K. Pollock, head of the Department of Political Science, University of Michigan and Len Upson, who was running the Michigan Citizens Research Council in Detroit, decided that we should try to get a merit system into the state government - - this was in '34 and '35. They persuaded Governor [Frank D.] Fitzgerald to appoint a commission to draft a statute for a civil service system. I knew Fitzgerald quite well. He came to the house and we discussed this, and I think it was a very courageous thing for him to do. In fact, I think in the end it brought about

his death, maybe by a heart attack -- it was sudden. Anyway, he appointed this excellent commission, one Republican and one Democrat and these two research men, Pollock and Upson and myself. We made a long and careful investigation of the spoils system and came up with this fact that no department head -- when they tell me today a department head can't fire civil servant -- no department head in those days could fire a McKay backed employee. So he just controlled the whole thing through his control of the employees of the state government. And when we got the statute through in 1937 and it began to operate, why his power was gone in the state. But he kept attacking the law and he got it repealed in 1939, got the statute repealed by the legislature. So then in 1940 we revived the statewide citizens organization and got it put into the constitution. That was the end of McKay's power in the state. But then we still had the problem of his power in the Grand Rapids City Hall.

SOAPES: Did you begin to work then with Dr. VerMeulen's group?

MRS. JUDD: No, this came along in the forties when we were working in the city hall. Welsh was mayor for twelve years -- from thirty-eight, I think, until we recalled him in forty-nine. But one of the problems was the financing of the city, didn't have enough money. The Chamber of Commerce in 1944 appointed a committee to go into the problem of city finances. I was on that committee, and Jerry Ford's father was on that committee -- it's just a little incident, I was going to tell you about it. We met at luncheon



once a week for quite a long time. Well the war was on you know and of course Jerry was in the Navy, wasn't he?

SOAPES: Yes.

MRS. JUDD: In the Pacific. We never could start talking about city finances until Mr. Ford finished telling us all about Jerry. So that was my first finding out about Jerry.

SOAPES: At that time, wasn't his father in the Republican party organization?

MRS. JUDD: I suppose so; I don't really know. He was in the paint business.

SOAPES: Yes.

MRS. JUDD: But he was so fond of that boy.

SOAPES: What are the principal traits of Ford, Senior that you remember?

MRS. JUDD: Oh, he was a very nice man; everybody liked him very much. I never knew him well enough to say much more.

SOAPES: You didn't have an intimate, personal relationship with the family?

MRS. JUDD: No, no. In fact, even today I'll bet Jerry wouldn't know me if he saw me. We've had plenty of correspondence during his years as congressman because I'm always telling a congressman what I think he ought to do. And we didn't always agree, of course.

SOAPES: Of course in this time now in the early forties VerMeulen's "Home Front" group is beginning to work, and with

your interest in good government I assume you had at least an interest in what they were doing.

MRS. JUDD: Yes, but I was not a part of it because I was very active in the nonpartisan League of Women Voters during the forties. In fact I wrote a textbook for the city schools on our city government - - it was an official textbook for the city classes and that was published in forty-eight. As I look back on it now I don't know how I ever did that and all that Welsh battle too.

SOAPES: But you didn't actually meet with VerMeulen's group or help him organize?

MRS. JUDD: No, but VerMeulen invited himself to our group once. You see in 1949 we had organized - - I say we - - just a whole lot of people that were upset over the Welsh administration. We got together and organized what we called "Citizen's Action." This was nonpartisan - - we had a Democrat, Julius Amberg - - the first, as president one year and a leading Republican, Bert Cole, the next. We continued to alternate. Then Tom Quimby was president and he later became an assistant in the foreign department in Washington - - he was a Democrat. I can't remember who the different ones were but they alternated. I am getting my story mixed up. It isn't time for Bill VerMeulen yet. Let me back up.

The object of a previous coalition up to that point had been to get adopted an amendment that would improve the tax assessment system, because this was one of the methods by which

McKay gained and held power in the city was by fooling with assessments. They would go up if he didn't like a person and down if he did. And that Chamber of Commerce committee in 1944 was the one that discovered this terrible weakness in our system and showed that assessments ranged from 10% to 90% of real value. So we started out to amend the charter to take the power of appointment of the assessors from the commission and to set it up as a single assessor under the city manager. And this caused great furor on the part of George Welsh and, of course, McKay. But we had a very fine organization as far as leadership of all different aspects of the community were concerned, our amendment passed by 186 votes.

When City Manager Frank Goebel announced his appointment of a professional appraiser as City Assessor at a City Commission meeting before a packed audience, Mayor Welsh went into a rage, fired him off hand and physically chased him down the aisle and out of the hall.

Those several hundred of us in the audience went off to meet in small groups in various offices, all agreeing that there must be a mass meeting in Fulton Street Park - right downtown, and have speakers. I was scared to death of the idea - - nobody will come and that will just kill the whole movement right then and there. But they all insisted on doing it. And Don Bauma, who was one of the speakers, and so was Dr. Littlefair, Minister of the Fountain Street Church, which is a very liberal church, and I think

Julius Amberg, were the speakers. Gerald White was the presiding official. Anyway, Don Bauma and I walked down Fulton Street, a beautiful evening, and all the streets seemed to be just full of people that were converging on the park, and I couldn't believe my eyes. Well, the paper estimated there were some five thousand people there. And McKay sat in his car on the side street and watched the whole thing. But thank goodness even George Welsh decided to put a cordon of police around the platform. I don't know what he thought might happen, whether all these good citizens were going to try and kill McKay or what. Anyway, I will never forget the chief of police, Bill Johnson, now of course he didn't speak to us and we didn't speak to him, but, oh, I was so glad to see him there. He's been a city commissioner since that time. Well, that was the way it got started. The Calvin College students put arm bands on and carried petitions for the recall of Mayor Welsh and got people to say they would take petitions - - it wasn't to get them signed there but to get people to take them and get them signed. So they distributed something like three thousand petitions. I can't recall the number of signatures we got, but it was a stupendous number from the whole city to put that amendment on the ballot. And to make a long story short, we filed the petitions for a recall election. And then George took it to court and said the petitions were invalid and there was something wrong with them - - ditto marks instead of dates or something like that. We lost in the lower court and we

appealed it to the state supreme court. Welsh in the meantime was president of the National Conference of Mayors, which was made up of mayors of non-city managers of cities, and he had been invited to go on that "Town Meeting of the Air" trip. Did you ever hear of that?

SOAPES: Yes, I've heard of that.

MRS. JUDD: It went around the world. And he was on it. And when he was in Rome, he got the news that he had lost the case in the state supreme court and he wired his resignation.

SOAPES: That was in 1949.

MRS. JUDD: Yes.

SOAPES: What surprises me is that with the power that McKay still had when you were trying to get this new assessment system in that you were able to get the vote to put it in. I'm sure he was using what influence he had to deliver his precincts in the way he could deliver them, and you were still able to overcome that.

MRS. JUDD: Yes, after a recount in several precincts produced errors. We did an awfully big job of campaigning for that amendment.

SOAPES: It was a lot of - -

MRS. JUDD: We had a lot of meetings in people's homes all over the city. It was a big organizational job. We got out a little newspaper. We had something like three thousand members - - everybody who had circulated a petition we considered a member.

SOAPES: So it was a project then of just good organization,

canvassing your potential vote and making sure you got it out.

MRS. JUDD: And it was being a very representative group to start with, the board itself was.

SOAPES: You had some well-known people of good standing.

MRS. JUDD: Yes. And the members had elected the board. It was well thought through. It was a great experience for me to be a part of it.

SOAPES: You said VerMeulen had come to your board and had made his case for your alignment.

MRS. JUDD: Oh yes, I never did answer your question about VerMeulen. He came to the Citizens Action board one day and gave us all the bad stories he could think of about McKay, and he was quite insistent that we turn the tables on McKay and use his own methods against him. But the board included two fine professors from Calvin College, and if you know our Dutch people, they're very strong on morals. And one of them was head of the Calvin Theological Seminary, Dr. Henry Stob, a very fine man. Another was Dr. Donald Bauma, a historian, I think. Now what was your last question?

SOAPES: Did they work with you in passing this assessment change?

MRS. JUDD: No, I don't think so. No, you see they were strictly partisan, they were Republicans. They called themselves Young Republicans, didn't they?

SOAPES: I think they had adopted the "Home Front" name by that time.

MRS. JUDD: Oh, yes. Well, it was a movement across the state - - Detroit had a group, Kalamazoo had a group, Flint had a group. And they were all trying to get McKay out of control of the Republican party because it was hurting the party. So, fortunately, that was going on at the same time and of course it all helped both ways. And of course after Welsh resigned and then we undertook to elect a mayor, and of course we elected Paul [Goebel]. And Paul had been active in the Young Republican group. Then the "Citizen's Action" deliberately and officially disorganized. So often these things die out and leave a bad taste at the end, but we decided that after we had gotten Paul elected twice that we were on a good route to keeping our good government and we decided to disorganize. We didn't know what to do with the minutes because we didn't want Welsh or McKay to get hold of the minutes; so we put them in a vault in the bank. And I got to thinking the other day - - I wonder if they are still there. I don't know who would have the authority to get them out.

SOAPES: It would be interesting to recover those to see what was there. This is important background information because of the fact of his [Fords] association with the "Home Front" and his father's work with it too.

MRS. JUDD: Oh yes.

SOAPES: When did you first become aware of Jerry Ford as a potential congressional candidate?

MRS. JUDD: In '48. The League of Women Voters had always held

candidate's meetings where the candidates of both parties, if it were a primary, would speak and would have an equal amount of time -- so it took a pretty strong person to preside to keep it timed that way. We knew that there was a lot of controversy, of course, in '48 with the McKay situation and our congressman was a McKay man, [Bartel J.] Jonkman. By the way, he had a very fine and respectable sister in public welfare work, but he was really just a McKay man in congress. So we invited our state president of the League of Women Voters to come over from Flint and preside with the idea that she would be very neutral. There were six candidates from the Republicans, and I think only one or two Democrats were running. And we had one meeting in each ward, and the meeting in the second ward was held first and that went along alright. And when we got to the first ward, it was held in the west side library, somebody criticized Jonkman and he lost his temper. And of course Jerry was one of the candidates there. Jonkman lost his temper and just flew into a rage right on the stage there and stepped down and walked out and never turned up at any other League meetings. And this really opened the way for Jerry, I think, people were so angered with Jonkman. Jerry was clearly outstanding as among the rest of the Republican candidates.

SOAPES: Did you work directly for Ford's campaign that year?

MRS. JUDD: No, I was working on "Citizen's Action." We were all being very careful not to get into partisan matters. This was



a League of Women Voter's candidates meeting I was talking about. The LWV of the United States you know sponsored the presidential debates in the last election, same kind of thing on a national basis which we were doing then in the state and cities.

SOAPES: The connection between Jonkman and McKay, was that a principal focus of what Ford was talking about during that campaign?

MRS. JUDD: I don't remember at all what he talked about.

SOAPES: I was wondering whether this campaign was run as an anti-McKay campaign or if Ford was running it on particular issues. He makes mention of his concern about Jonkman's isolationism as being something he didn't care for.

MRS. JUDD: Oh, he does?

SOAPES: Yes.

MRS. JUDD: Well, maybe Jonkman had taken his cue from [Arthur] Vandenberg. Vandenberg was a great isolationist, you know. In fact the League of Women Voters fought him like mad all through the twenties and early thirties on the World Court issue, and it was his amendment that really killed the membership of the United States in the World Court. And then it was in the forties that he had this -- what do you call it in a religious meeting?

SOAPES: A conversion.

MRS. JUDD: A conversion, yes, and really became the chief advocate of the United Nations which included the World Court.

That was '44 and '45, and maybe Jerry took a leaf out of that book,

I don't know.

SOAPES: Was any question ever raised about Vanderberg having any relationship with McKay?

MRS. JUDD: Well, I suppose they must have been friendly. Nobody could be elected as a Republican if they didn't have McKay's backing. But I don't think McKay had anything to do with Vanderberg's international policies. I don't think McKay was interested in that field.

SOAPES: You said that once Ford was in congress, you had numerous opportunities to communicate with him and that you had disagreements with him now and then.

MRS. JUDD: I don't know what they were about. I still disagree with [Harold S.] Sawyer, and keep voting for him.

SOAPES: Once Ford is elected he's got the job of not only being congressman but keeping his fences mended back here at home. Do you remember how he kept his name before the voters back here? Was his name in the paper all the time?

MRS. JUDD: No, I'm sorry to say my memory doesn't pick up very much of it. I was very busy with the League of Women Voters and with the state constitutional convention and later with the state civil service commission.

SOAPES: His name was raised a couple of times in the fifties about possibly running for governor or for senator. Do you remember those?

MRS. JUDD: No, I don't remember anything about that.

SOAPES:           What kind of reaction was there in this community when Ford moved up to be the leader of the Republicans in the Congress?

MRS. JUDD:        In the house, you mean?

SOAPES:           Yes.

MRS. JUDD:        Oh, of course we were very proud of him, sure. Very proud when he became president. He's been criticized on that pardon business, but I think he had to get that issue out of the way before he could do anything constructive. I think he had good men in when he was president, his advisers, did a good job.

SOAPES:           Do you remember any situations back home here while he was congressman when he was involved in controversies that seemed to be somehow threatening to his political position, any difficulties he seemed to be in?

MRS. JUDD:        No, I just wasn't close enough to him. I wasn't as active in the national League of Women Voters then as I had been earlier. So national issues, I didn't have much time for them, I guess.