

November 2, 1976

POOL REPORT # 77 - TRAVEL TO ELEMENTARY SCHOOL, VOTING, AND RETURN TO PANTLIND HOTEL

The President left the hotel by motorcade at 7:12 this morning for the Wealthy Elementary School in East Grand Rapids. There were a few people along the motorcade route, very few at first, some of them waving and some of them just startled. The motorcade stopped at an Amoco gas station, McMurray's Gas Station. He got out there and said that this was where he used to buy gas. He recognized the two workers there, Al and Jim. They were dressed in the Amoco uniforms. He recognized some of the people there. A woman walked up in a red coat and carrying a white poodle and he recognized her as a friend of his mother and father named Miss Minnie Haven. When he was running for Congress, she used to give coffees for him. Her quote was, "I remember getting some coffee for you when you were running for Congress." While he was standing around, she apologized to the President for not having combed her hair adequately this morning.

The reason he stopped at the service station basically was because we were running early and he didn't want to get to the polling station before he was scheduled to appear on nationwide television. We stood around awkwardly, and finally Helen said, "Are you feeling lucky this morning?" The President's answer was, "Sure do. Don't you think we have good reason?" Then he asked her what she thought, and her answer was, "I don't make predictions" or "I never make predictions." He kind of laughed nervously.

We moved on down Lake Drive toward the Wealthy Elementary School where he was greeted outside by a man and a woman who were officials of some kind. The first guy he greeted was Robert Stoppels, the Mayor of East Grand Rapids. The lady's name we didn't get. The two officials then took Mr. and Mrs. Ford inside and, as we went down a corridor, there were a number of paintings by children, water color paintings and cutouts by children of people standing and waving, saying, "Welcome, Mr. and Mrs. Ford." They pointed out the kids had made this for their arrival at the polling place. Then the Fords came into the main voting place and went around shaking hands, and then went forward to the polling area. The City Clerk, John Wielsma, told Roy Gutman that Ford had never voted a stylus punchout ballot before and this had to be explained to him, how to do this. The ballot has no names on it. Instead it has numbers 1 through 228 with a small punchout box above each number, and the concept is for the voters to stick this ballot into the box, which has the names on it, and then you push the appropriate lever beside the name you want. They said this varies from precinct to precinct so no one gets an advantage.

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We know what number voters they were. Betty was 35 and the President was 36. As I understood it, the polls opened officially at 7:00. They actually started voting at 7:41. You go into this little metal podium-like affair and it is open, and you can see them voting as they are voting, but you just can't see what their hands are doing, what levers they are pulling.

They finished about 7:45. It took them about 3-1/2 minutes to vote. The President took Mrs. Ford's ballot and then handed them both to the City Clerk who then put them in a steel box. As the President handed this ballot to Mr. Wielsman, the crowd burst into applause.

There was a long line of election officials. One was Mrs. Julia Snyder, who identified herself as the Republican Inspector. I asked who the Democratic Inspector was, and she said, "We don't have a Democratic Inspector at this district." Asked why, she said, "There just aren't enough Democrats. It is not worth the effort."

Then the President and Mrs. Ford moved out of that school voting area rather slowly, stopping to chat with people along the way. And as soon as he got outside the door, there was a large crowd, mostly school children, but also some adults, and they had been shouting "We want Ford." And then they worked their way very slowly through this crowd toward the limousine. It must have taken 15 minutes for them to get through the crowd and up to the limousine, with President and Mrs. Ford shaking hands all the way.

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They got out close to the limousine, and the President picked up a child, a little boy who was there and who had on a red, white and blue cap that said "Ford" on the front of it, and he had a flag he was waving. The President and Mrs. Ford put this little boy on their shoulders, lifted him up and posed with him. The little boy's name was Chris -- presumably Christopher -- Waring. He is seven years old, and in the second grade. They start politics early here.

He also signed an old campaign poster from, I guess, his first race for Congress, the 1948 campaign. It says, "Jerry Ford For Congress." It said, "In appreciation, best wishes, Jerry Ford." It was owned and held by a man named John Ritmaster, who said Ford used to have his hair cut at John Ritmaster's barber shop, Herman. Herman had ten barbers in those days.

Then we finally got out of there and we took off for a place called Granny's Kitchen. We arrived at Granny's and there was a sign outside that said, "Welcome Home, Jerry." It turned out he used to go there when he was a Congressman frequently to have blueberry pancakes. It just so happened his friend and wealthy patron in this area by the name of Peter Secchia, was there with his son Charlie. He is 40 years old. His son Charlie is five years old. The President and Mrs. Ford first went into Granny's Kitchen, an antique-type place, various type antiques around and a player piano in one corner.

The President went around shaking hands with a lot of the customers, some of which he knew, and apologizing for having broken up their breakfast. They said no, glad to have you, good to see you. The reason he went to Granny's restaurant this morning was last night he ran into Dave Chesnut, the manager of Granny's, and he reminded Ford last night he used to come to Granny's for blueberry pancakes when he was in Congress. That is how he happened to go.

He had a blueberry pancake this morning. The nickledeon player piano was playing "One Sweet Kiss" on a nickel provided by Bob Griffin. Mr. Chesnut had apportioned a table in the middle of the room for the Fords, and they were in the process of sitting down when the President spotted Secchia over in the corner in a booth. He said to Mrs. Ford, "Why don't we go over and sit with Pete?" Mrs. Ford said, "Yes," and they went over and sat in a small corner booth.

I spotted one antique sign I thought was kind of interesting. It said, "Genuine Ford parts used here." Also, there was an antique sign saying, "Love One Another" right over the booth. We were there about a half hour, I guess.

The coffee was good and the danish was very good and it was all free. We weren't invited to join. We were told he had a blueberry pancake. Mrs. Ford was hungry. She ate the whole thing. Then he went outside and shook a lot of hands on his way. He signed a guest book on the way out. The bill for the breakfast came to \$4.37, which you will note is less than \$5.00, so he paid in cash.

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Peter Secchia lost his son, and we don't know if he found him. In the guest book, Betty signed first. Both gave their address as 1600, and Betty signed "Marvelous, I will be back." The President signed, as always, "Great food and nice people." Then they went out and shook a lot of hands again on the outside. A crowd had gathered, a lot of school children. They worked the crowds. Then we drove back to the hotel.

I talked with Nessen on the parking lot and asked him what he was going to be doing for the rest of the day. Nessen said they all hoped to nap a little bit this afternoon, including the President and Mrs. Ford. Tonight they will have dinner at the White House with Mr. and Mrs. Garagiola, Mrs. Edith Green and probably some others. According to Nessen, the President invited Garagiola, whereupon Garagiola called his wife up in Scarsdale and said, "Honey, we have been invited over to Jerry's house on Tuesday," and Mrs. Garagiola, according to Nessen, replied, "Jerry who?" (Laughter)

I got one thing from Secchia. He talked to a couple of us outside Granny's, describing the breakfast table conversation. This is a quote: "The President seemed very pleased with this morning's reports and last night's events." Then later he said, "The First Lady and I have a pact. We win either way. Either the President wins or if he loses we get to see more of him."

Back here at the hotel, there was a waitress from the restaurant, the Knife and Fork, downstairs with an old 1931 high school yearbook, and she showed the President his picture in there. The yearbook doesn't actually belong to the waitress who had it. It belonged to a friend in Mrs. Ford's class, a woman named Evelyn Morris. Her married name is Greenwood. The President signed the yearbook by his picture, just signed it Gerald R. Ford without much imagination.

If you go down to the Knife and Fork, the lady, whose name is Trudora Flagg, I am sure will be glad to let you read the book. There was another Ford quote when he was signing the guest book at the restaurant. He turned to reporters and said, "I used to come here before I started cooking my own English muffins." That was before Helen Thomas asked if he had chicken soup with his breakfast. The President laughed and said, "I think I need some more."

Here in the lobby of the hotel there were a number of people waiting for him and some were obviously old friends. One he gave a big bear hug to, a little short chubby woman. He said, "Stephanie, how are you?" Her name is Stephanie Waltz, the one with the red tam-o-shanter. On the way out the President said, "Give my best to everybody," as he left the lobby, and somebody shouted, "Good luck today," and he said, "Thank you."

-- Bob Pierpoint, CBS
Strobe Talbot, Time Magazine
Larry O'Rourke, Philadelphia
Bulletin