

MAN OF SOUTH HIGH SCHOOL, ON TO VICTORY - PARAPHRASE OF SCHOOL SONG.

by JAMES McNITT

On the day Gerald Ford was named to be Vice-President of the United States, I dug my 1931 Pioneer Annual from its attic repository. The frontispiece identifies it as the yearbook of South High School, Grand Rapids, Mich., from where we graduated together. Now that an unprecedented series of events have catapulted him into the presidency, the book may well have a high intrinsic value. It is a storehouse of information on him and his background.

Ford's picture appears with the other seniors, his autograph "Gerald Ford" in red ink alongside. Beside the picture of the football team and elsewhere, this is abbreviated to "Jr. F". His activities are listed: National Honor Society; Student Council; Inter-Hi Council; Sodalitas Latina; Glee Club; Varsity Club; Football, Captain; Football, Second Team; Basketball, First Team; Track, and Photo Committee.

South High, as its name indicates, served the south end of Grand Rapids. It was a red brick building built in 1913. In the same building was South Junior High, comprised of the 7th and 8th grades. It is now South Middle School, located in a predominately black area.

The 234 members of the Senior Class were assigned to Session Room 217, under the supervision of P. L. (Pop) Churm. There were not that many desks or seats, so they had to be shared. The names indicate a mainly Anglo-Saxon background, with a good representation of Dutch, several Polish or Russian Jews, and a smattering of Syrian, Italian and others.

In his first major speech as President on Aug.12, Ford stated: "I am here to confess that in my first campaign for President - of my senior class in South High School in Grand Rapids, Michigan, I headed the Progressive Party ticket and lost. Maybe that's why I became a Republican." Tena Sikkema, feature writer for the annual, described the election this way:

National politics never caused such furor as did our platforms. Three parties were in the field, and each was determined to seize the offices. The mad scramble was dignified by expert and beautiful mud-slinging on a truly mature scale by the campaign managers; by admirable sportsmanship on the parts of all candidates, even under virulent attacks; and by the fiery excitement among the citizens of 217. Friendships were broken like match-sticks, bets were laid and disputed, split tickets were discussed and rediscussed, and every foot of wall and ceiling space was contested for, that one more placard or streamer might be placed. And yet when one young co-ed entered, dressed as a bridesmaid and carrying a bouquet of wilted celery, all antagonisms were forgotten, and we roared helplessly with laughter. The suspense of it all! The importance of having a city voting machine, eliminating the danger of stuffed ballot boxes, quite staggered us. (We still feel

certain we pulled the wrong levers). Our dark horse won the election and we came to appreciate our choice of officers long before the year was over.

The dark horse was William Schuiling, to become president of a major Grand Rapids bank, and later one in Alexandria, Va. (Perhaps his and Ford's paths have crossed). He was interviewed recently on television. "I knew we were in for an uphill fight," he said. "We won by moving fast and taking the initiative, first by adopting the name Republican for the ticket. In an area where the majority of parents voted the straight Republican ticket, this was an advantage."

The third candidate was Leo VanTassel, last reported as being Vice-President of a northern Michigan university. He resigned as Editor of the Pioneer monthly and Editor-to-be of the Pioneer yearbook to run for President.

Around this time Miss Thelma Anton, faculty adviser, stopped me in the hall. "Have you heard that Leo has resigned?" she asked. (I hadn't.) "We want you to take over as Editor." I was overwhelmed. Joining the Pioneer staff the previous year as a writer, I had gained minor fame due to a flair for words and a lively imagination. A shy, introverted youth, I mentally questioned my ability to fill the difficult and demanding job, but I stammered an acceptance.

Although Ford was defeated in the election, his views as a conservative Republican probably reflected the views of the student body as a whole. Some few of us, dismayed as the depression reached its darkest days, were switching allegiance to the Democratic Party. We even had a small Young Pioneers organization, the youth branch of the Communist Party. One time when they painted May Day announcements in red paint on the sidewalk beside the school, a few of the football team took some of them from their classes and forced them to scrub the paint off. I do not recall that Ford was involved in this incident.

The depression was to eliminate or delay higher education for many of us. Ford's football talents would guarantee that he would go on, but there is little doubt that he would have made it anyway. He worked at Bill's, a small but popular restaurant across the street from school. He would also work while attending the University of Michigan. He might also have been able to get a scholarship on the basis of his academic standing. His membership in the National Honor Society indicates that he was in the top 10% of his class.

His football ability has not been exaggerated. As captain of the 1930 South High team, he led a great squad to an undefeated season. Only two touchdowns were scored against them in nine games. The season culminated in a Thanksgiving Day game with traditional rival Union, from Grand Rapids' west side. Heavily Polish ethnically, they had a big, strong team which was also undefeated. South Field, in use this season for the first time, was packed to its 12,000 capacity. The stage was set for the BIG GAME, a battle for the mythical state championship.

The game was anticlimactic. Snow fell steadily, accompanied by bitter cold. In the stands the seniors and others in the student section had been issued squares of colored cloth intended for making mass displays. They offered only a little protection as head coverings against the mounds of snow as it collected on our heads and shoulders as we huddled together. On the field conditions could only be described as miserable. No effective offense could be launched, and

neither team penetrated beyond the other team's 10-yard line. It ended almost inevitably in a 0-0 tie. Union was later to forfeit the game due to their having used an ineligible player.

Ford was named All-State and All-City center. Art Brown was chosen All-City tackle. Today he has a noteworthy collection of memorabilia of the team. Silas (Sikee) McGee, the only black on the squad, was All-City end. He froze his hands during the Union game. John Heinzelman was made All-City halfback, Allan Elliott All-City quarterback. In spite of not attaining All-City rating, Lewis Cooley, a halfback, was chosen by his teammates as most valuable player. Cliff Gettings, who coached the wonder team 44 years ago, now deals in real estate in Grand Rapids.

The team members, now known as the 30-30 Club holds annual Thanksgiving Day morning get-togethers. The 1974 meeting was held in Washington. The rapid turn of events brought this arrangement into question, but Ford passed the word down quickly that the meeting was still on - at 1600 Pennsylvania Ave.

I called Art Brown, the club secretary, recently. He amazed me by immediately remembering my name, the fact that I had been Editor of the annual, and even quoted from a letter I had written to the Grand Rapids Press some years before after an article had appeared about the team and the club.

He is a goldmine of information about the team. I was surprised to learn that there are still 27 members on the club roster. Marvin Blackport, who had built up a large meat-packing business, had been killed in a boating accident some time before. A couple others had lost touch.

Brown has been interviewed by TV and press reporters, and has been besieged by calls and letters. He gratefully acknowledges his wife's assistance in handling the correspondence.

The club's latest project is reclaiming a 7' drum which had been a feature of the band at football games in the twenties and thirties. The only other one known was at Purdue University. The drum had been vandalized while on loan. It is planned to restore it with a new head bearing the names of all the members.

It should be recalled that when this team was playing, most players went on both offense and defense. Platooning was practically unknown. Forward passing had not developed to its present form. When the ball was downed near the sidelines, it was left there and not brought in toward the center. Field goals, rare in high school games, were scored by dropkicking the ball.

Ford also participated as a regular in other sports, although not with the outstanding superiority he showed in football. He was a member of the 1930-31 city championship basketball team which had an 11-5 record. Robert Eckart, leading scorer in the city, Lewis Cooley and Leon Joslin were all named to the All-City team. Ford and Marty Geyer rounded out the team. They were coached by Danny Rose, who would go on to become basketball coach at Central Michigan University. He retired not long ago, and the university honored him by naming their new field house after him.

Here again the game was far different from today's. For example, one game on the schedule ended up in a 10-9 victory by South over Union. The highest total was 38 points by South in a romp over a weak Davis Tech team. A center jump after every basket was the practice then. Elimination of this and other rule changes have led to the speedy, high-scoring game as now played.

Ford was also a member of the 1930 regional championship track team under the guidance of "Pop" Churm, participating in the weight events. Here again he rated as good but not great, being overshadowed by Leon Joslin, who broke an 18-year old city record in the discus with a toss of 117 ft. 2 inches, and by Archie Ross, who broke his own school record in the shot put with a throw of 44 ft.9 inches. He was to add over a foot to this in 1932. The javelin was still an event as late as 1929, but was eliminated about this time by city schools as being too dangerous.

I have in my possession a newspaper clipping dated May 13, 1932, headlined "Jerry Ford Michigan's Best Freshman Gridder". The first paragraph reads: "Gerald Ford, 18-year-old center from Grand Rapids has been selected as the most valuable freshman candidate for next fall's University of Michigan football team. The Chicago alumni trophy was presented to Ford Thursday night at a banquet which marked the final meeting of the spring football squad." It goes on to note that he was the first center ever to receive the award, and outlines his career at South. He is described as 6 feet tall and weighing 187 lbs. He would play at around 200 lbs. during the balance of his career. Although he can still be considered a big man, by today's standards for linemen he would be considered something of a pygmy.

There is no need to go into his record at Michigan; that has been well chronicled. I was to see him play only once, when Northwestern played them to a 0-0 tie. I was the guest of former classmate Paul Vonk, then a student at Michigan, now President of Oglethorpe College in Atlanta, Ga.

Personal reminiscences of Ford are relatively few after 43 years. The only one which comes to mind involves a relatively minor incident. He and I were in a Public Speaking class together. I chose as my subject for one speech the hypocrisy of "amateur" tennis, with its under-the-table payments to outstanding netters. Ford, possibly interpreting it as an attack on sports in general, took issue with my stand. I hastened to assure him that I had no wish to demean the sport as such, but that I felt the payments should be out in the open. The popularity of pro tennis today seems to bear me out. Today Ford's early training in public speaking is serving him in good stead.

The class of 1931 was the first to graduate from the newly constructed auditorium adjoining the school building. Strangely enough, I do not recall any details of the graduation. Class Day exercises stick in my mind. It was a steaming hot day. The boys, dressed in blue serge coats and white flannel trousers, had to raise up very carefully from the folding chairs set up on stage, otherwise the chairs might accompany them as they proceed down the aisle. Perhaps the girls had similar trouble; I cannot say.

In May of this year Ford came to the University of Michigan to give the commencement address. Afterward he toured the campus, making stops at various points including his former fraternity

house. Eventually he reached the newly constructed Bentley Historical Library on the North Campus. His route had not been publicized for security reason. Outside of the press and the welcoming committee, only my wife and I and the children of the library director, Dr. Robert Warner, were waiting. As Ford strolled up the walk, pipe in mouth, I was able without trouble to get to shake his hand, introducing myself. He appeared to remember me and greeted me cordially, returning for another word after signing a few autographs. The Ann Arbor News the following day published a picture of him signing a card for Jennie Warner, with me in the foreground.

Ford has donated his papers to the Michigan Historical Commission, which is housed in the Bentley Historical Library. He made no attempt to take them as a tax deduction.

After he was escorted into the building, he was presented to the library staff by University President Fleming. Introduced as being the young man to be in charge of sorting and classifying the papers of Bill McNitt, our son. He has M.A.'s in History and Library Science, and had been training in this type of work under Dr. Warner since early in his college career.

Now as I contemplate early retirement next year after 38 years with a major oil company, Gerald Ford at the same age is tackling the world's toughest job with zest. I am sure all his old classmates wish him all the best.

Note by William H. McNitt: Dad originally typed this on his manual typewriter in 1974. The copy I scanned from had some text crossed out, a sentence typed at the bottom of a page that was meant for an earlier paragraph, and a few handwritten changes. This version presents the original text in a cleaner form.