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Interview with David K. Ford, Class of 1921 (transcript)

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Case Western Reserve University School of Law

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David Knight Ford, 1921 graduate
Of Counsel--Spieth, Bell, McCurdy & Newell
Oliver Schroeder's summary of interview, April 11, 1988
transcription by Kerstin Ekfelt Trawick

[A summary] of an interview between Oliver Schroeder and Mr. David Ford, at Mr. Ford's office, 2000 Huntington Building, Cleveland, Ohio, on April 11, 1988, from 10 to 11:15 a.m. This is a part of the oral history project being prepared by the law school in anticipation of its 100th birthday.

Mr. Ford was a graduate of the class of 1921. His father, Horatio Clark Ford, died in 1915. He lived with his father and family in the Ford home located at the corner of Adelbert Road and Euclid Avenue, where the Allen Medical Library now stands. This home remained there until 1926. It was built in 1853 by Horatio Clark Ford, the grandfather, who died in 1875. Dave lived in this farmhouse until 1920 when he married. The home was used, probably, as a stop on the Underground Railroad prior to the Civil War. The Ford property went from Cornell to East Boulevard south of Euclid Avenue.

David's father graduated in 1875 from Michigan. He then studied law in a law office. The early death of his grandfather required his father to hold on to the area and to become an astute businessman using his legal education for over 30 years. David was born in 1894 in this Ford home at Adelbert and Euclid. In 1888 the College for Women was established and the university used this homestead as the headquarters for the college. When the College for Women moved to the Mather campus and the law school began in 1892, the law school then was housed in this homestead.

Question 1. Why did David Ford go to our law school?

He was greatly influenced by his father, who was a genuine entrepreneur, using his legal education in the areas of banking, real estate, oil, street and inter-urban railroads, in Cleveland, Wheeling, Syracuse, and Quincy, Illinois. Also in electric utilities. David saw the breadth of opportunity which a legal education could give him as he desired to go into the business world. He originally hoped to go to an Eastern law school, but his father's death in 1915 required his enrollment in Western Reserve University's School of Law because of financial reasons.

Question 2. Was the experience at law school what David Ford had anticipated?

Mr. Ford was happily surprised at the quality of students at the law school. He came in contact with persons such as Carl Weygandt, later chief justice of the Ohio Supreme Court; Thomas Herbert, later governor of Ohio; Lisle Buckingham, whom Mr. Ford described as a rough diamond but a truly great individual, who established his own law firm in Akron to become a leading Ohio practitioner; William West, later to become general counsel of the Lake Shore Railroad; Hall Kellogg, prominent in bar activities at the local, state, and national levels. It was a fine sprinkling of men from Ohio colleges. The most notable

college was Ohio Wesleyan. The Ohio Wesleyan students were polished, sophisticated--like Ivy League students. The boys from Oberlin were more religious and naive.

Question 3. What do you recall concerning your teachers?

All the students had the soundest respect for the four full-time faculty members--Dunmore, a quiet man with a broad comprehension of law and of life in general; Brightman, a very studious legal scholar who insisted that you knew Williston on contracts; Throckmorton, a genuine scholar of the old school, of Virginia background and color; Finrock, the utility man who held the school together, who helped each student to find work in order to pay school expenses. Then there was a handful of lawyers from downtown. This enabled the school to offer wider participation in the actual practice. Judge Hadden, of the Probate Court, and formerly a prosecutor, was one of these. A. V. Cannon, an authority on bankruptcy, was another. Frank M. Cobb, who specialized in public utilities law, was a third.

Every student had to work his way through law school. It made for a first-class spirit. The class numbered 30 to 35. Classes were held from 8 a.m. until noon, allowing time to work in the afternoon. The professors wanted a full-time study of law, but the students needed money in order to pay for the legal education.

Mr. Ford went one year to the law school, starting in 1915. Then he had almost four years in service. He returned in 1919 for two more years in order to obtain his degree. At the end of the second year David Ford and William Dawson took the bar exams. The faculty discouraged both of them from trying to do so. But in June 1920, taking these bar exams, both Ford and Dawson passed. David married and was on his honeymoon before knowing whether he had passed and had been admitted to the bar.

4th question. What do you recall concerning your fellow students?

There was a very high level of effort in the law school, of seriousness and businesslike consideration. Since most if not all had to work in order to pay for legal education, there was not much time for frivolous matters. All had the purpose of seeking to qualify for law practice. This was the goal not only formally but informally.

How did your law study prepare you for your life's work?

It prepared me reasonably well. I had time to consider the outside world. The volumes in Hatch Library brought me in touch with things beyond the law, and I enjoyed studying there. I also attended occasionally Joseph Hostetler's Save the Nation Club, which met in Hatch Library Saturday afternoon in the west room. It was composed of Joe Hostetler, who had graduated in 1910. It was composed also of A. R. Hatton, Lomar Beman, Edward Morgan (later to become the Cleveland city manager). Hostetler was the moving spirit. It discussed national and local affairs. David attended these meetings even before entering law school, when he was in his teens. This opened David's eyes to the great problems of the world. The experience of listening

to the discussions by these men had profound influence on him. The head of the History Department also was a participant in this Save the Nation Club. He also became, at a later date, the director of the Western Reserve Historical Society. This group was not an ingrown group. It was out-looking. Able debates concerning national affairs were important. Another influence was the McBride Lectures, which brought prominent persons to the community under the auspices of the university. David had the example of his father, who carried great weight in his education. He had time also for civic leadership. He was a member of the Cleveland City Council and president for several years. He was instrumental in developing stores of water as the young city of Cleveland was expanding. David's father also worked to get the Fairmount Reservoir established, the primary source of water today for the east side of Cleveland.

Frank Cobb, brother-in-law of David Ford, taught public utilities. He grew up with the Illuminating Company from its beginning. He was very tough on David when the exams came around. All the courses were serious, comprehensive. Reading, thinking, discussing was the order of the day. It was a growing atmosphere and environment which had great influence in his preparation for life's work. Even the architecture of the law school building, beautiful as it was, had an impressive impact on David Ford. All the graduates were attached to this old but beautiful building. The law school was an excellent place, for out of it grew a devotion to education and a desire to create able workmen in the law.

Cleveland attorneys who helped establish this law school in the formative years were Homer Johnson and John Oberlin in patents law. The law school came out of an evolving practice of law in Cleveland. It was not simply a group of academic figures.

Question 6. What special interests do you have in politics, charities, religious activities, community activities? How did your legal education help you in these activities?

Law school experiences gave Mr. Ford a deep respect for the life of the mind. This is something that every lawyer has the opportunity to achieve. A lawyer will have a series of problems, some minor and some major. He can instinctively apply principles of law and legal experience to their solution. This is a good system, and it means that impasses in human existence can be simplified, straightened out, resolved, by the application of legal thinking.

Another highly important factor for life of any community is the organization and development of the business life. Again I was fortunate in a 25-year experience in the formation and development of a corporation closely allied to Case School. This was an exciting experience, to aid in putting together the Lubrizol Corporation, so that it could operate profitably after seven years of successive losses. The personnel which came out of Case School have made a permanent impression on the life and utility of that now international corporation.

Question 7. What special anecdotes do you recall concerning life at

the law school?

There was a humorous but unfortunate experience when the head of the Union Mortgage Company in Cleveland, who had a great personality and was a confidante of most of the faculty, got the faculty to invest their money in the Union Mortgage Company. All of the faculty lost their money in this investment when the Union Mortgage went bankrupt. Interestingly, this Union Mortgage executive was an authority on how to pass the bar exam.

Bill Dawson and Mr. Ford were very close as classmates. Dawson was very valuable to the school as a teacher in later years. Dawson and Ford quizzed each other in the dormitories in preparation for the bar examination taken at the end of their second year. Another student, George Perry, started out with them planning to take the bar exam at the end of the second year but then got cold feet and decided not to.

This concludes the interview.