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Interview with Seabury H. Ford, Class of 1925 (transcript)

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Seabury H. Ford, 1925 graduate
Ford & Simon, Ravenna
Interview with Oliver Schroeder, May 24, 1988
transcription by Kerstin Ekfelt Trawick

Speaking from the home of Seabury Ford, 12 West Geauga Street, Aurora, Ohio, 9 o'clock, Tuesday, May 24, 1988.

Now we'll begin ask Mr. Ford some questions, to let him reminisce. Seabury, why did you go to law school at Western Reserve?

Well, probably because I wanted to take the combined course, which at that time was six years. I graduated from Adelbert in 1923 and from the law school in '25. Well, I always sort of wanted to be a dentist--pull the two uppers and fill the lower--but my father wanted me to be a lawyer.

Was your father a lawyer?

Yes.

Well, you go back a long way in Ohio.

My father, my grandfather, and my great grandfather. My great grandfather was Seabury Ford, for whom I was named, and he graduated from Yale in 1825 and walked back to Burton and practiced law there and was later elected governor of Ohio in 1848.

What do you remember concerning your father's desire for you to be a lawyer? Did he put much pressure on you to go into the legal practice.

I don't remember much pressure, but I know that's what he wanted me to do. He made it quite plain. He attended Adelbert but he graduated from Michigan Law School. [break; discussion of tape recorder]

What do you recall about your law teachers? And your law classes?

Well, I can remember Al Brightman, who taught Contracts. He was a sort of a wizened up old guy at the time, and he was very strict. And I remember Finfrock, who taught-- Wait a minute, Throckmorton taught Torts, Brightman Contracts, Finfrock taught--

Equity or Trusts?

Yes, Equity and Trusts, that's it. And of course Dean Dunmore taught Real Property. In my third year there, no--my first year--I wanted to graduate with my class of 1923, get my A.B., and I failed Agency. For some reason I couldn't grasp it. And because I had gotten good grades in torts--well, from Throckmorton and Finfrock and Brightman particularly, and from him too in Real Property--the dean arranged for me to be re-examined. And I guess I passed it, at least they passed me anyway so that I could graduate with the Adelbert class although I had attended the law school as a freshman there that year. I'll never

forget that.

Dunmore was a very understanding man and a very compassionate person. He gave you a warm feeling when you talked to him. Brightman was cold as ice, and Finfrock was sort of comical. He gave you some amusement, because he always told these same stories when he got to them in his teaching routine.

Do you recall your fellow students? Any of those individuals, some of whom you may have seen in the practice?

I remember Russell Chase, because he later was quite close to me socially and also because he joined the Lawyers Guild, which I felt was subversive. He also went over to Spain and fought in the civil war. And I remember Thornbury, P. L. Thornbury, because he chewed tobacco. Later he got married and practiced there in Cleveland for a while. I met him one day, and--well, I knew he had quit chewing because his wife had insisted upon it-- Later I met him on the street, and he had a cut of tobacco in his mouth, and I said, "What happened?" He said, "The honeymoon is over." He was chewing again.

Let's see, who else do I remember? There were two women in the class, and I don't remember them very well. Well, I remember Fletcher Andrews vividly, because he was president of the class of '25. Fletcher was quite a guy. I was up to his house several times, and I knew his brother-in-law, Norm Jeavons, very well, who had a complete train set in his basement, and that interested me because I was always a train buff. I used to get on a train here in Aurora, go to New York. The train would stop--

Was this the Baltimore and Ohio?

No, Erie. It would join with a train from Chicago at Youngstown, and the two-- This would start from Cleveland, go to Youngstown, join with the train on the main line and go to New York. Coming back the same. It would break up at Youngstown, come to Cleveland.

You'd leave here in the early evening, or late in the afternoon?

Well, it was different times. They had eight trains a day here at one time. There were two commuter trains in the morning into Cleveland, and one train out a little later. Then in the evening well, there was a train out about two o'clock, and then the regular commuter train was about 5:30 or 6 o'clock, left Cleveland at 5:30, then there was a late train, called the 44, that left about 10:30 or 11. You could go in and go to a show at the Hanna or the Ohio, then come home on the late train.

You started in the practice of law then in Cleveland?

In 1925. Well, I worked for the law firm. My father was in a firm, he wasn't active in the firm because he was president of a bank, the Ohio Trust Company. The firm was Ford, Taylor & Hasselman in the Hanna Building. 1024 Hanna Building. We were just down the hall from Harold Burton's firm, which was called Burton & Laughlin. (?) Who

later became senator and city manager of Cleveland, or mayor of Cleveland I guess. Anyway, that's where I started, and I worked for three years for $75 a month and my office. Now these guys start in I guess at 18 or 20 thousand dollars, I don't know what it is.

It's more than that.

It's crazy and it's wrong. Absolutely wrong. The thing I decry the most today is the advertising by the lawyers. It is no longer a profession, Ollie, it's a business.

You'd be surprised how many lawyers, even younger lawyers who are our graduates, have said the exact words. It's a business now, not a profession.

Well, in the 1920s you could call another lawyer on the telephone in Cleveland and you could bank on what he told you. You can't today. If it's important enough, the conversation on the telephone, I write a letter and say, "This is to confirm our conversation." Because they come in afterwards and say, "You said so and so," and I did not say so and so. It isn't trustworthy any more. You can't depend on what people tell you.

Now you left Cleveland then, and came down into Portage County.

Well, what happened was-- well, actually I can make it brief-- I practiced law with Frank Taylor and Bill Hassleman till 1930, and then I started a trucking company, with $900. Ran it out of my office there. In one year we built up to $350,000, and then the thing blew up because we were growing too fast for our capital. We incurred liabilities greater than we could handle. So that even though the crediors came in and said if they-- Oh, they ousted me in the meantime as president of the company, and put in a fellow by the name of Thomas. The creditors met, they were Standard Oil, and ACF-- American Car Foundry--people like that, all over the country. They offered to give us a year's moratorium, if they would put me back in charge of the company. The boys that were in with me refused, and so it went through bankruptcy.

Then I wanted to go back into practicing law, or decided to, and my father recommended that I go to a small town. So we looked at Geauga County, where the Fords came from, and that was all tied up with a firm by the name of Bostwick--Hugh Bostwick and his three sons. Four lawyers there, Richard, Harold, and Scott. So I looked at Ravenna, Portage County, and that was pretty well tied up with Loomis & Carris, but I lived here in Portage County, in Aurora, and my folks had lived here for 120 years successively, so we decided that I would start in Ravenna because I could run for prosecuting attorney, which I did, in 1934, the first year I opened an office in Ravenna. I was paying $15 a month for the office, and I couldn't pay the rent the first year. I'd go back into Cleveland and try to make some money, so it was pretty rough. Then I got beat, for prosecutor, in '36, in the Roosevelt landslide. I ran 8,000 ahead of the head of my ticket, Alf Landon, but still lost by a thousand to my opponent. So I carried on and kept working at it, and finally in 1944 I was elected prosecuting

attorney of this county. Then I was in for 8 years, 2 terms.

Now this interesting home that you live in here, 12 West Garfield in Aurora, how did you acquire this? Tell me something about this.

It was the home of old Hobson Hurd, who came to Aurora from Goshen, Connecticut, in 1814 I think it was. And he opened a store, that building right across the street there, it's all made our of wooden dowels, there isn't a nail in the building except in the shingles in the roof. He became wealthy, and this was his home. I think it was originally a farmhouse for the acreage here. He acquired a 235-acre farm here. This was all farm.

One of his grandsons built this house next door, and another daughter built the house beyond that, and that's all there was here for quite a while. But he bought this place from John Singletary, who had built it as a tavern and as a stagecoach stop. The stagecoach ran up Chillicothe Road here from Chillicothe, Ohio, the then state capitol. From Fairport to Painesville up until about 1827 or somewhere in there, whenever the railroad came in.

Another interesting thing about it is that the railroad bends here, there's quite a curve, it's coming down from Cleveland in the southeast direction. And instead of going straight, in Aurora it bends around and goes east to Mantua. It was Hobson Hurd that did that, because he didn't want the railroad next to his house. So he made them go down there. Because he owned clear half a mile, clear down to the railroad, down this Garfield Road, Route 82.

This original building, I think you said, was 1805. You can see the width of the walls here.

You can see down below, I'll take you down in the basement, the bark is still on the logs that form the-- what do you call it, the thing that holds the floor. The rafters. The bark's still on the logs. They felled the trees here, put them right in. Now Mrs. Louise Hurd, the wife of Elijah Hurd, who was the son of Hobson, who lived here later-- She did it over, did this house over, in 1870. And she took out the little windows and put in the windows that are in. So they date from 1870.

How do you think the law school prepared you for this interesting career that you've had? What did it give you?

Well, they gave me I think theories, taught me how to find the law, and gave me a sense of being, I might say, as a lawyer. But they didn't teach me anything about the practice. For instance I didn't know what a praecipe was. I started working during my term in the law school, for the law firm downtown. I'd take the streetcar, go down Euclid Avenue to the Keith Building and get off-- well, the Hanna Building first, and then the Keith Building-- and I'd relieve the girl at noon on the PBX board. So I had to learn the procedure in the courthouse. I'd get bawled out by the clerk, they hated young lawyers, because they were always asking questions and didn't know what they were doing. So of course they hated us, and made life

miserable for me for a while till I got onto the ropes-- where to go to file a paper, where to go to look for this, how to look at a court docket, and all the things I did as a runner for this law firm.

You have done more than just practice law, but in your practice did you get into some specialized areas or did you keep pretty much a general practice?

Most of my practice was defense in tort cases. Automobile, casualty. I represented at one time 30 insurance companies, people like Travelers, Hartford, the big insurance companies. Aetna. I still represent Westfield Company, from Leroy. It used to be Leroy, now it's Westfield. Ohio Farmers Insurance Company. They had the original charter, and they've kept it you know.

A very interesting little town. We used to go down, they have an inn there. I've eaten at that inn, years ago. High class operation.

It's an old company, I think it was issued in the 1840s, wasn't it? [break--coffee]

While you were a prosecutor, did you have any particularly interesting criminal cases?

Yes. My second murder case came a month after I was in office, against a fellow by the name of Ned Kellogg who had killed a woman in Kent who worked in the Standard Drug Store there. He had followed her home and hit her with an Erie Railroad coal chisel. She bled to death, because the snow was six feet deep on this street and nobody saw her. Nobody drove down this street. Well, you couldn't see it anyway, because she was on the sidewalk. What had happened, she had panicked when he followed her, and she hit him over the head with her pocketbook. He reacted just like an animal. Savage. The interesting thing about the case was that I couldn't get him the chair because the four psychiatrists testified that he had the mind of a six and a half year old child. Well, seven is the dividing line on moral turpitude. So they found him guilty, gave him life without hope of pardon or parole. And he died in the penitentiary. Ned Kellogg. The other interesting thing about it was that this testimony that he had a six and a half year old mind was proven so completely wrong that I never had any belief or use for psychiatrists or psychologists after that. And I still don't.

Because, for example, he had-- We found this coal chisel after the snow melted, and he had thrown her pocketbook into the river down there, the Cuyahoga River, right near the street where it happened. I went over to see him, as he was leaving for the penitentiary with the sheriff. He said, "Ford, I wouldn't be taking this ride if I had thrown the chisel in the river with the pocketbook." The pocketbook was never found. Now was that a six and a half year old?

That's the first thing I thought. That sounds a little bit sharper than a six and a half year old.

And there were around 30 or 40 women came in and confessed that he had

molested them, or peeked through their window, or done something. His pocket was full of pornographic stuff. He used to go to all the houses of ill fame around here and Alliance and Akron. That was all right and he didn't bother-- It was after they closed the whore houses that he became bad and became abusive of women. My belief is too that if they'd have the whore houses running, have them taxed and regulated and inspected, and segregated, there would be a lot less murders that are caused by these guys that can't go out and socialize with a woman in a normal manner, because they are repelled or they are repulsive. This fellow was completely repulsive to a woman.

Another funny thing about the case was, the Garden Club of Kent, and the newspaper, and the Chamber of Commerce, were just raising the devil with me to hire a New York detective or something to find the guy that did this, and what I did was, I threw about a hundred sex offenders in the can, in the jail, and then interviewed them one by one. Till we came to Ned Kellogg, I said, "Wait, we got him." He confessed. Took me all night, till four o'clock in the morning, I was ready to say lay down. After he confessed and I had it in writing and everything, we arraigned him. The same Garden Club that was after me to apprehend the violator, and the Chamber of Commerce and the other people, the do-gooders so to speak, came into court and they said, "Why Ned Kellogg couldn't have done it. He's worked at the Williams brothers' mill for 23 years." What he did was lift bags. He filled bags at the end of the chute. His arms were like steel. God, he was strong. These same people came in. I was so disgusted. Now there's a human element. I never got over it.

You were also in a very famous situation here at Kent State University. The great misfortune of the killing of the four students. What was your role in that? And how did you get into that?

I was appointed by the attorney general of Ohio as-- I think my title was special counsel to the attorney general of Ohio.

What were you charged to do?

I was like a prosecutor. I was in charge of the grand jury. We convened a grand jury of 15 people, and they met for six weeks. We presented all kinds of evidence. I went-- We had a captain, a lieutenant, three sergeants of the Ohio State Highway Patrol working full time for us, and two fellows from the BCI, Bureau of Criminal--

Investigation.

Intelligence, like the FBI only-- We had other people. We had about 300 witnesses. We met for six weeks. One interesting thing that we had before the body was a film depicting the SDS convention in San Francisco the December prior to this. This happened in May of 1970-- May first, second, third, and fourth. They had set Kent up as the target for this very thing that happened. SDS was Students for a Democratic Society, and all the wild radicals that were there at Kent were in on this thing. I don't remember how we got it, we got it under the table, so to speak, but we proved that there were about a dozen professional, if you could call them professional, radicals that

went around the country and just that was their business, to stir up trouble and riots. I myself saw this long before I got into this thing.

Well, on the date of May fourth in my office there we were watching the people with guns across the roofs of the buildings in Ravenna, because they had called up and said they were coming over and burn the town down, kill the sheriff, burn the banks, and they had called the sheriff and told him-- they were coming over three thousand strong from Kent. So we were watching out of my office window and two cars came by with New York state licenses, six persons in each car. I couldn't identify them, but they were-- these wild costumes they had. They were undoubtedly the ten or twelve agitators, professional agitators, that had stirred this whole thing up, and they were escaping before the FBI or anybody got in there. It was right after the shootings. They were in the morning, about eleven or twelve o'clock. And this was about three o'clock in the afternoon. Because that night, that Monday night, they rounded up everybody, well the state patrol was on one corner, Kent police on another, sheriff's department on another, and the Kent University police on another corner--four corners. And they had these people all lined up there. No, that was Sunday night, the night before. And instead of just breaking it up, if they had photographed those people and identified them, they would have caught all the instigators of that. That's about the story, except it didn't have to happen. It was completely planned and engineered.

Do you still go into your office every day?

About five days a week. Once in a while I take a day off. I never go down on Saturday or Sunday, of course. But this year for the first time I spent about five months in Florida, first time I ever spent that much. The year before I spent about three months down there, and before I used to go down just for two weeks at a time. That's all I could spare, you know.

Where do you go in Florida?

Lauderdale by the Sea, a little town a mile long between Pompano and Fort Lauderdale. Right on the ocean. I go there because I want to swim in the ocean. There are 54 minerals in the ocean, and it helps my arthritis, and it builds me up, no question about it.

Do you find the water cold?

A little bit as you go in, but pretty soon you're acclimated. It's about 70 to 74, the temperature is that warm. Of course it seems cold to you at 98 when you go in, you know, but pretty soon you're acclimated to it and I like to swim. I go in every day that I can, except when it's too rough or it's too cool or something. I came up on the autotrain. It went broke once, and for about two years it didn't run. Because the guy branched out to Louisville on another line and I think he bit off more than he could chew. Now Amtrak is operating it, from Sanford, Florida, to Lawton, Virginia, which is about 5 or 10 miles below Washington. [conversation about train]

Well, is there anything else you can think of that you'd like to immortalize on tape? You've enjoyed your life as a lawyer.

Well, I've often felt I could have done better by going to a growing town. Ravenna is not a growing town. There was one more person there in 1980 than there was in 1970. That tells you how much it grew. It's built up within the city limits; you have to get out in the township. Now Aurora annexed all of Aurora Township, so that we have 25 square miles you see. It's bigger than Cleveland proper. It's conducive to normal and healthy growth of the town, when it's all under one government instead of two. The township trustees are always fighting with the city council. You see, part of Ravenna is city and part of it is township. It limits the growth, constricts it.

Well, I don't know that I can think of anything else offhand. I was rescued at sea by William Wrigley Jr., out in California in 1927. I was in a boat, and the boat stopped running. I was coming from Catalina Island back to Avalon. He came along in a yacht, he owned Catalina Island. He and Mrs. Wrigley invited me to Chicago and I never went. Should have gone. I was a damned fool not to follow that up. I've had a lot of experience like that. My uncle was head of the Richfield Oil Company, which was the biggest-- Well, it was only the oil business and the movie business in Los Angeles at that time. It was a city of about 300,000 or something like that. He said, "We will be bigger than New York City one day," and I didn't believe it. [more desultory conversation]