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## A Page in History

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# A Page in History

After Gerald Ford's passing, Mark Griffith '77 recalls his own part in presidential history.

Story by Amelia Benner '09

The death of former U.S. President Gerald Ford on Dec. 26, 2006, had particular resonance for one Illinois Wesleyan alumnus. Mark D. Griffith '77 served as a page at the 1976 Republican National Convention in Kansas City, rubbing elbows with Ford and other major figures of the era.

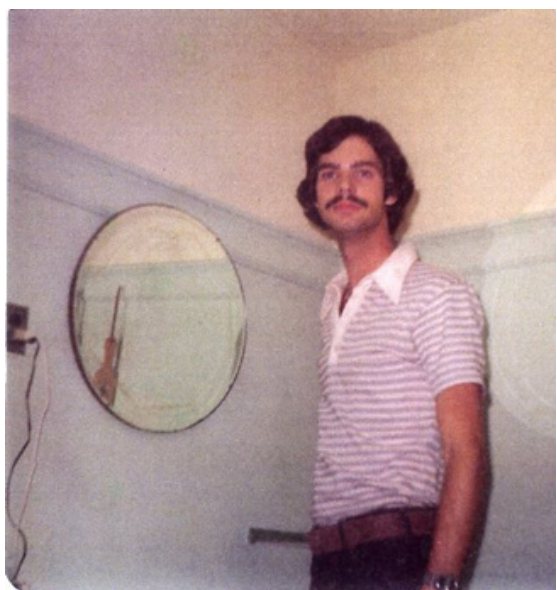
Griffith was appointed a page by Illinois Congressman John B. Anderson, who was grateful for Griffith's help as the Ford campaign's campus coordinator for Central Illinois during the primary. Griffith, who was president of the IWU College Republicans, had also served as a page in the General Assembly in Springfield.

The 1976 convention was, according to Griffith, the last "bloody convention," in that both candidates — President Ford and California Governor Ronald Reagan — went to the convention without enough delegates to clinch the nomination.

There were 256 pages at the convention, most of whom spent their time in a room below the convention floor, awaiting an assignment. Griffith, however, was one of seven pages promoted to "Officer of the Convention" status, an honor that included a special Secret Service clearance allowing him to explore the behind-the-scenes workings of the convention as he pleased.



For his book, Griffith used his own vast collection of Ford campaign memorabilia, some of it collected while he worked as a page at the 1976 Republican convention.



Griffith calls this picture of him, taken in Kemp Hall at the height of the 1976 campaign, his "rock star photo."

"I was able to go meet Betty Ford, Sonny Bono, and Vice President Nelson Rockefeller, and was able to escort Cary Grant to his speech," Griffith said. "We all ignored Senator Dole. No one suspected that he would be the vice presidential nominee. Pat Boone, with his white shoes, asked me not to tell anyone that he was there — despite the fact that everyone had already told me."

Although Reagan — who would win the nomination and general election four years later — had developed a strong following, Ford and Dole were able to capture the party's 1976 nomination. Griffith was posted below the podium during Ford's acceptance speech. In an attempt to foster Republican unity, Ford summoned Reagan to address the convention. Hoping to get Reagan's autograph, Griffith called out, "Governor Reagan, I am from Dixon, Illinois!" as he passed.

The governor, a native of Dixon, stopped to chat a moment and gave the page his autograph. Griffith, who remembers Reagan as "very cordial," admitted, "My statement was actually a big lie, but close enough." He actually grew up in Ashton, Ill., 15 miles from Dixon. "My grandfather was county supervisor (in Dixon)

and wrote the welfare checks for Reagan's father, which somehow I neglected to mention. He was preoccupied with his impending speech and didn't notice that I kept his pen."

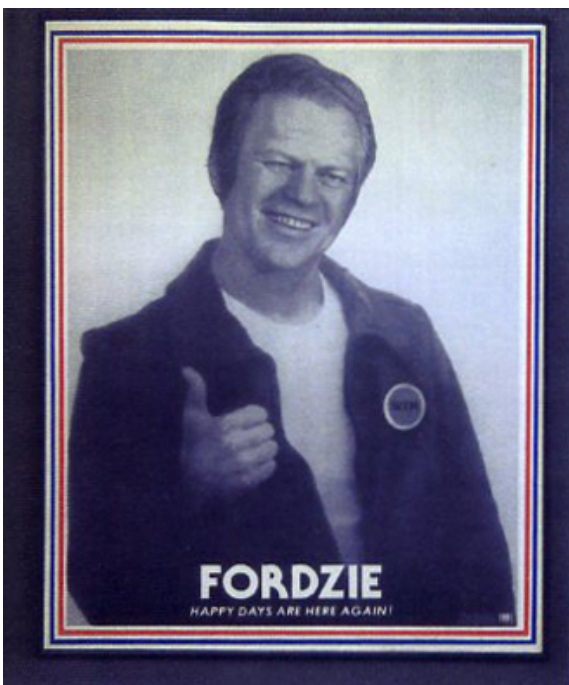
After graduating from IWU in 1977, Griffith went to medical school at the University of Illinois. He now serves as medical director of the rehabilitation center at Home Hospital in Lafayette, Ind., where he lives with his wife Ann and their two children.

Griffith credits IWU History Professor Paul Bushnell with inspiring him to pursue his love of history. "He kept trying to get me to be a history major," Griffith recalled. "I wanted to go to medical school. I guess I got to do both."

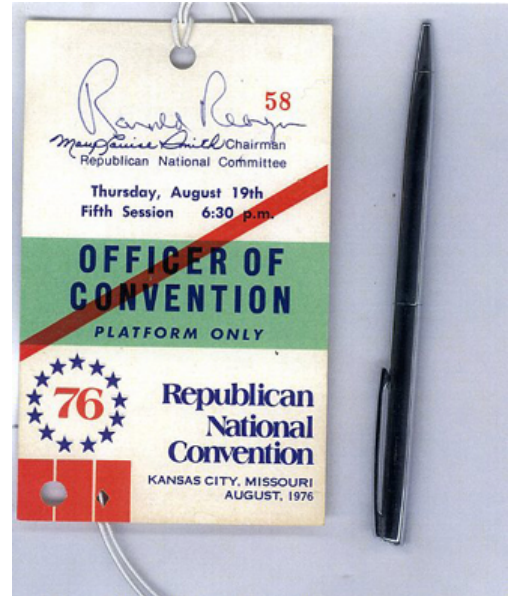
In 2003 Griffith published *Heroes Next Door*, a collection of oral histories from World War II. In the foreword to the book, Griffith writes of the importance of preserving soldiers' stories.

"Since age 7, I have been talking to World War II veterans about their experiences," wrote Griffith, who has served in the Navy Reserves as a lieutenant commander. "Being somewhat old-fashioned even as a child of the seventies, I feel there are certain things one should know if he is to be considered an American." Griffith is now working with PBS on a WWII segment for "History Detectives."

Despite Ford's eventual loss to Jimmy Carter in the general election, Griffith has fond memories of the 1976 campaign. Griffith owns the largest private collection of Ford items in the United States, and in 2005 he published *Neighborhood Headquarters*. The book is a pictorial essay of memorabilia from the 1976 campaign, featuring photos of Republican promotional materials ranging from socks to Frisbees to toilet paper, all emblazoned with Ford's name.



A campaign poster from Griffith's collection depicts Ford as Fonzie from the popular T.V. show "Happy Days."



Ronald Reagan autographed Griffith's convention pass--and Griffith kept his pen.

Both President Ford and Senator Dole contributed forewords to the book, which is used as a reference at the Ford Presidential Museum in Grand Rapids, Mich. "This book was effective in transporting Betty and me back to my Presidency and with it all the fond memories of the wonderful Americans we met while criss-crossing the country during the '76 election," Ford wrote.

In the wake of Ford's death, historians are reassessing his contributions to American politics, including his controversial pardon of Richard Nixon, who was forced to resign in the wake of the Watergate scandal. Griffith believes that most Americans now realize that the Nixon pardon was a necessary step.

"President Ford's legacy is of trying to do the right thing," Griffith said. "A polar opposite of Nixon's personality, Gerald Ford was what the country needed, post-Watergate. His calm demeanor kept the country together."