Meeting the Mayor[1]

Dearborn Historian, 2012

Back in the summer of 1967, as I was packing to move from southern Illinois to East Lansing to begin doctoral studies at Michigan State University, I saw on the evening news graphic pictures of the Detroit Riot. My wife Jane and I were stunned as we watched that beautiful city burning. The network included a side story on the city of Dearborn and its long-serving segregationist mayor, Orville Hubbard. In one scene white women at a police station were taking target practice at black silhouettes. The tone of the story was unequivocal, that there was a racial polarization in the Detroit metropolitan area that had now exploded, and that Dearborn was at one end of that pole. It was a perspective that was widely shared.

During my years at Michigan State, my colleagues in urban studies often mentioned Dearborn and its reputation, which was really the reputation of its mayor. Not all images were bad. I remember one professor who said that as a graduate student he had studied Dearborn's zoning code because it represented a model of good urban policy. Most stories, however, fit a pattern. There were stories in the Detroit Free Press and Detroit News about the city and its mayor, often including provocative quotations. In 1972, when Alabama Governor George C. Wallace ran for president, he held an enthusiastic, overflow rally at the Dearborn Civic Center. While any political group can use a civic center, Wallace's choice seemed to those of us in East Lansing to say something about the city. Back on that July day in 1967, when Dearborn and Mayor Hubbard first penetrated my consciousness, I had just returned from two years in Africa, where I had been studying African political systems. In between packing boxes, I turned to my wife and said of Dearborn, "Now there is a place I would like to study."

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[1] This was published in the *Dearborn Historian* in 2012.

There is an old saying that we should be careful what we wish for because we might get it. Little did I know that I would end up spending my career in Dearborn and would come to like the city. In 1973 I was a new resident of Dearborn, having just joined the faculty of the rapidly expanding University of Michigan-Dearborn as an assistant professor of political science. Ironically, I knew a lot more about the city than about the university that was my new employer.

In 1974, after less than a year on the UM-D campus, a colleague, Helen Graves, arranged for her 17 political science interns to go down to city hall to interview the mayor. My colleague, Frank Wayman, and I had just begun work on a book on Dearborn and were eager to tag along, as was Judy Phair of the University Relations Department. On the appointed day I went down with them to meet the great man. It was an unforgettable experience.

Hubbard was celebrating his 71st birthday when we interviewed him. He had been mayor since 1942, having won 15 consecutive terms in office plus a recall election. As we walked through City Hall, we noted the signs and hand-lettered placards that adorned the walls of the corridors and of the waiting room. One said, "Happy Birthday, King of Mayors." Another praised his record as the longest "reigning" mayor in the US. We were to meet the mayor in his cabinet room after his department head meeting ended. We had a long wait. Finally a few men began to drift out of the meeting. One of them walked over to us and said quietly and solemnly: "You're lucky. The mayor's in a good mood today." When the cabinet room had emptied, our group entered and took its seats. The mayor sat at the end of the long table and surveyed the group. "Ask me some questions. Ask me any questions," he said to break the ice. One of the students began in a noncontroversial way, "How many people do you have in your cabinet, mayor?"

"Oh, 19, 20, 21. We meet every day at 1:30." His face lit up. "I just got a new toy today." He reached over and rang a bellhop's bell on the table. "Stand up and give your report. You've got three minutes." He rang the bell again. "Time's up. Sit down. Next report." He looked over to his right, where three heretofore unnoticed men sat slightly behind him. "Why, I've got three of them here with me now. Stand up." The three men stood. "Joe here's my city planner. I could have hired a Ph.D. city planner. First thing, he'd want three assistants. Joe here doesn't give me trouble. He's taking some courses at Henry Ford Community College. He's taking English courses."

"What are you students studying?"

Someone said, "Political science."

"Political science." The mayor paused a beat for emphasis. "Political science is useless. You want a good education, read the dictionary. That's what I did when I was younger."

The mayor had been an early opponent of the Vietnam war and, as a result, Dearborn had held the first advisory referendum in the nation on whether the United States should withdraw from Vietnam. Despite his personal opposition to the war, his administrative style was clearly inspired by the military chain of command. Over his chair was inscribed inspirational plaque:

> "If you work for a man, . . . remember an ounce of loyalty is worth a pound of cleverness. If you must growl, condemn and eternally find fault, then resign your position and when you are on the outside damn to your heart's content. But as long as you are a part of the institution do not condemn it because if you do the first high wind that comes along will blow you away and probably you will never know why."

The mayor was determined to inculcate similar values in the young, so he gave the students another bit of advice from his own youth: "Best thing that ever happened to me, I joined the Marines." Those who knew the mayor knew he loved to talk of his time in the Marines, and we were given several colorful stories about military life.

The next question involved a sensitive local issue. It dealt with Dearborn's poorest neighborhood, often called Salina or the South End. It was huddled on the far side of the giant Ford Rouge industrial plant, almost outside of Dearborn. Many in the room knew of the mayor's efforts to rezone the area for industrial development and to break up the community of Arab immigrants, southern whites and East European ethnics who lived there. The city would send housing inspectors into the area and cite homeowners with more violations than the value of the house. Then the city would offer to purchase the home for demolition. Many students also knew of the community group that had fought him in the courts and were successful in having his bulldozers stilled by court order. City officials often referred to the area as a "blight" on the image of the city.

All of the student questions were polite but direct. This one was no exception: "What about the South End? Haven't you allowed that region to run down and be taken over by criminals and thugs? I had a girlfriend who did her student teaching there and said she never felt safe."

To his credit, the mayor seemed to enjoy these questions and got into the spirit of the exchanges. But on this particular point, he was almost defiant. "Crime? We don't have any crime problem in that part of town." He grabbed the phone at his right hand and pushed a button. "How many dames got raped last year in Salina?" he bellowed into the phone without greeting the person at the other end.

Almost immediately the mayor hung up, again with no word to the person on the other end. "One," he said triumphantly to the student. "One."

"But isn't it true that you tried to tear down those houses and replace them with factories?"

"Of course we tried to tear down those houses. That area is not fit for human beings to live in. They can't even open the windows of the school because of the pollution. And when we tried to move people out of a place like that, some troublemakers accused us of being against the people who live there. Of course, some judge agreed with them. But we're not through yet. The case is being appealed and we are going to win." (Note: A federal judge ruled in favor of the neighborhood association. The dispute left deep scars in the city.)

At the time of the interview, work was under way on the Fairlane Town Center, just across Evergreen Road from the University of Michigan-Dearborn. This major new shopping center was being built on one of the few remaining natural areas in the metropolitan region. The Henry Ford Wildlife Preserve on the university campus had an ecological balance between woods and prairie. Animals that lived in the forest there would graze on the grass nearby. Extending Evergreen between Ford Road and Michigan Avenue and constructing the Fairlane Town Center would cut the zones in half and upset the ecological balance. This prompted an environmentally oriented student to ask the mayor his position on the project. The mayor was an enthusiastic proponent of the project. He was insistent that the term "Henry Ford Wildlife Preserve" was a fabrication of people opposed to the project. There was no such preserve. Moreover, the environment would not be harmed in any way. The only consequence for the environment would be that "we're going to get rid of some rats and weasels down near your school, but when we get done, we're going to have the biggest and best shopping center in the country."

A student asked the mayor about Dearborn Towers, a large apartment building on the Florida gulf coast originally purchased for the exclusive use of Dearborn retirees. The building was an illustration of the mayor's massive program of municipal socialism. Another service he had established was Camp Dearborn, a 626-acre park some 35 miles from town. It was also developed for the use of Dearborn residents for camping, boating, fishing and swimming. Within the city he built subsidized senior citizen apartment towers designed to avoid the anonymity and powerlessness of old folks' homes. Each resident had kitchen facilities and a locked private entrance. For homeowners, he provided free snow shoveling from the sidewalks of ill residents, as well as generally efficient municipal services such as garbage pick-up. There was an often-repeated story of a man who phoned the mayor to complain that his garbage had not been picked up. The mayor said, "I'll take care of it right away."

He drove to the man's home and picked up the garbage in a bag. He took it in his car to City Hall, walked with it to the sanitation director's office, dumped the garbage on his desk and said: "You missed this. Make sure it doesn't happen again." (Note: This story may well be apocryphal. I heard in Carbondale, Illinois, from a former Dearborn resident well before I ever moved to Michigan. True or not, it is close enough to credible that people tended to believe it). The mayor was proud to recite to us such accomplishments and told us with conviction, "Everything good I ever did was socialistic."

Now, however, he was being asked about one of his most controversial ventures – Dearborn Towers – which he had the city purchase years after a referendum had indicated voter opposition to such a project. The mayor defended his Florida adventure with obvious pride: "I like to think of it as my colony." If Dearborn Towers was his colony, then Dearborn was too – the home territory of his empire – governed by dint of the landslide victories, once reaching 87 percent of the vote, he received in the quadrennial mayoral elections.

That idyllic "socialist" empire governed by a Republican mayor had come under attack, however, for its lilywhite character. Although surrounded by predominantly black municipalities, Dearborn had only 14 black families in 1974. The mayor had made several provocative statements in favor of racial separation that made him sound very similar to Wallace, who had promised the people of Alabama that he would promote "segregation today, segregation tomorrow, segregation forever." With the class dancing around the issue for some time, one of the students finally addressed the question head-on: "Mayor, I'm sure that there's one thing that's been bothering us all for a long time. Since you're such a charismatic leader in the community, why don't you do more to promote integration, especially in residential patterns in the area?" The context for this question was significant. Hubbard had always been outspoken in his views on race. He had acted to keep Dearborn a white enclave between Detroit and Inkster. Rumors of police action against black motorists plagued the city, and a home had been vandalized in 1963 when local residents responded to an unfounded rumor that a black family was moving in. Police had allowed a mob to gather at the house for hours and did little to intervene. Hubbard had also been targeted by the Michigan Civil Rights Commission for posting clippings about black people on city bulletin boards. Now he was being asked point-blank about these issues.

The mayor looked down the table at the female student who had asked the question. He seemed to squint his eyes. "You're black, aren't you?

"Yes, mayor, I am." She spoke with great dignity.

"Not that it matters to me personally. Why, when I was stationed in Santo Domingo in the Marines, I had three or four black girl friends. One was a high yaller." (Note: light in color).

The mayor proceeded to recite the law, which, he explained, had made segregated housing illegal in the United States since a 1948 Supreme Court case. Brochures outlining this law were found in all real estate offices, he explained. Then he looked the black student straight in the eye and concluded with a matter-of-fact tone: "Of course, smart people live where they're wanted."

Orville Hubbard was always hard for political scientists to classify. He was liberal, even "socialistic," on the role of government in the society. To him the New Deal was taken for granted, for it assumed that the government had an important role to play in providing social services to citizens. This posture made the mayor a liberal. One the other hand, he emerged as a conservative on many other issues: crime, law and order, race and busing.

From a number of perspectives, Orville Hubbard remained a legendary figure with a national reputation. For 36 years he was the mayor of Dearborn, but he was always more than a mayor. It was no accident, for example, that David Good's biography of Hubbard, *Orvie,* was subtitled *The Dictator of Dearborn.* As mayor, Hubbard drove out the gangsters, provided efficient service, removed eyesore buildings, increased property values and made Dearborn a prime residential location. But because of his status as an avowed segregationist – more than a few observers considered him an outright racist -- he gave Dearborn its own reputation as a place that black people would visit at their peril. His reign was enveloped in turmoil and disputes and litigation, but even many of his bitterest opponents agreed that he was fully committed to the people of his city.

As a personality, Hubbard was alternately brilliant, brutal, arbitrary, volatile, defiant, authoritarian, creative, vengeful, domineering, imaginative. Perhaps most remarkably, as we discovered from our day with him, he was accessible to the public. After our meeting with him, the class went to the steps of the city hall for a photograph with the mayor. He was well known for these photographs, which served to preserve a moment in history. A few days later each of us received our copies. Mine is framed as a reminder of that amazing day when Mayor Orville Hubbard, just a year before a debilitating stroke left him largely mute, took time out of his busy schedule to show us why he was often considered one of the most colorful elected officials in American politics.

The Author: Dr. Ronald R. Stockton is a professor of political science at the University of Michigan-Dearborn. He is co-author, with Frank Whelon Wayman, of *A Time of Turmoil: Values and Voting in the 1970s* (Michigan State University Press, 1983). A specialist in the Middle East as well as Dearborn politics, Stockton has closely studied former Dearborn Mayor Orville Hubbard and, he says, "got to know him well, at least from a distance." In 1973 Stockton was one of several observers at a

class interview project that constituted the only time he and Hubbard ever met. His notes were intended for inclusion in *A Time of Turmoil*, but were never published. This article is based on those notes.

In the photograph, Professor Helen Graves is to the right of the Mayor. Professor Ron Stockton is in the second row, far right. Professor Frank Wayman is in the middle row, fourth from the right. Judy Phair, University Relations, is in the back row, far left.