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Marie Actis (April 15, 1972)

C. Richard Arena
Whittier College

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Oral History Interview

with

MRS. MARIE ACTIS

April 15, 1972
Bakersfield, California

By Dr. C. Richard Arena

For the Richard Nixon Oral History Project

ARENA: This is interview #1 with Mrs. Alvin P. Actis. P. stands for Perrinetti. The maiden name of Mrs. Actis is Margaret Marie Morrison. The friends of Mrs. Actis during her days in Whittier usually called her, simply, Marie. We are now in Bakersfield, California. Today's date is April 15, 1972, Arena interviewing. Mrs. Actis, may we begin by my asking you where and when you were born?

ACTIS: Yes. I was born in Hedley, British Columbia, Canada, September 24, 1916.

ARENA: And how is it that you did come to California?

ACTIS: My father was a mining engineer and moved to Mexico, so that when I reached the age of high school I had to be put in a. . . . I was tutored my first year of high school, and then I came up to California to finish my schooling. My father stayed down there and my mother brought me and my two brothers and sister out here.

ARENA: Do you mind if I ask you how old you were when you did go to Mexico? Did you spend practically all your years . . .

ACTIS: I was about five years old when I went down there, and came back out here when I was around fourteen--thirteen, I guess, or going on fourteen.

ARENA: I see. And just what were the years of your education in California, and the schools that you attended?

ACTIS: Well, I went to Whittier High School for my sophomore, junior and senior years, graduated in 1933. And then I went to Fullerton Junior College for a year and a half and Pasadena Junior College for a half a year. And then I went to Whittier College for two years, and graduated in 1937. Is that adequate?

ARENA: That's very good, thank you. Did you go on and do any postgraduate work?

ACTIS: No. I went to Bakersfield and started teaching school, and other than a few classes here and there to supplement what I needed in teaching, I haven't gone back to school.

ARENA: What year was it that you started teaching in Bakersfield?

ACTIS: The fall of 1938.

ARENA: In other words, a year after your graduation.

ACTIS: Yes. I graduated in 1937 and substituted for awhile, and then came up here to teach.

ARENA: As far as you recollect, what was the year or the time that you met President Richard Nixon?

ACTIS: Well, it was one summer, and it seems to me it was the summer before I started Whittier College, which would be the summer of 1935.

ARENA: And what do you recall about that meeting?

ACTIS: I met him at a party at Mrs. Minnie Pierce's house in Whittier [California]. She had lived out in East Whittier and knew his folks quite well, and she had children and had a party. That was where I met him, that evening. I think his brother Donald [Francis Donald Nixon] was there that night, too. They were both there, as nearly as I recall, anyway.

ARENA: Do you recall what the occasion of the function was at Mrs. Pierce's home?

ACTIS: No, I don't recall any special occasion. I think it was just a party. She was a fun-loving, outgoing sort of person, and had a lot of young people around her house a lot of times. In fact, I think the party was down. . . . She used to live on I think it was Magnolia [Avenue], and it was by some school. Anyway, she always had a lot of young people around, and it was a party at her house.

ARENA: What do you recall about the personality, or your own first impressions, if you do remember them; your own first impressions of the President on that occasion?

ACTIS: Just that he was very nice. I think I was surprised when he called me and asked me to go out, because I just thought he was very nice, and I didn't realize that he had even noticed me, you know.

ARENA: In other words, you had not been there with him. You happened to be at the same . . .

ACTIS: No, it was just a bunch of young people together. I didn't go to the party with anybody, nobody did.

ARENA: I see.

ACTIS: It was just sort of a gathering. I can't remember what the occasion was. I think it was just sort of a get-together sort of thing. I don't remember anything special, except that he was very nice, and I was just happy to meet him, and that was all.

ARENA: Do you recall if possibly he played the piano, or in any way--I won't say, was the life of the party--but did he in any way take over for the group in any way, maybe in the sense of telling jokes, or playing the piano and leading the group in singing? Do you recall that he did or did not do that?

ACTIS: No, I'm sorry, I just don't remember anything like that. All I remember is just people and conversation, and that's all I can remember now, really.

ARENA: Do you think this made the group itself, or it may have been anything like a social religious group? I'm thinking of . . .

ACTIS: No, I'm sure it wasn't anything like that, because there was just a lot of young people, and they weren't even all college young people. They were just friends. Mrs. Pierce had a great many friends, and so did her children, and it was just a mixture of people. She had quite a lot of affairs like that.

ARENA: How was it that you knew Mrs. Pierce, or that you got into the party?

ACTIS: Well, Mrs. Pierce had been a friend of ours for a long time. She was a friend of my mother's, and she lived not very far from us for several years. I think my mother met her through our church, the Presbyterian Church in Whittier. That's how mother met her to start out with.

ARENA: When you were here in Whittier--I want to be clear--you were with your mother but not your father. Your father remained in Mexico.

ACTIS: That's right. My father stayed down there to. . . . Well, when we came out of Mexico, I think it was around 1930, and there was really a depression in those days, so my father couldn't give up his job. Instead, my mother brought all of us out here so we could have better schools. But my father couldn't come. He had to stay there and work. And, as a matter of fact, he died down there. He was going to come up the next summer and retire, and he died on Christmas, before he could come up here.

ARENA: Do you recall the year?

ACTIS: Yes, it was 1947 that he died. And the following summer he had planned on coming out and retiring. You see, after he stayed down there for so long, then he reached the age where, if he did quit and come out, it would be too hard to find a job. Besides, he was a Canadian. He would probably have had to go to Canada to find work. It was just more sensible for him to stay down there, and he had a good position with the company down there.

ARENA: Did you continue to revisit Mexico, by any chance, during this period?

ACTIS: No, we couldn't afford it, keeping two homes going and with four children up here. All four of us went to school. And so they just couldn't afford it. My father would come out on his vacations, he would come out to visit us, because it was cheaper for one person to travel than for all of us to.

ARENA: When is the next time that you saw President Nixon, and would you describe that to the fullest of your recollections?

ACTIS: Well, the best I can do--I can't describe individual times, because I can't remember them. About all I can do is tell you that we did go to some movies. And I remember sitting and having something to eat after movies in restaurants, and sitting and talking quite a lot. But I can't remember how many times or what shows, but I know I went out with him several times during that summer. The next thing that I remember most clearly was a trip out to a gambling ship. In those days the ships were out past the three-mile limit, and one evening on a date we went out there in a water taxi. And we had a lot of fun. I mean, it was sort of like Las Vegas [Nevada], but it was all in one boat.

ARENA: Did the boat have shows, like Las Vegas does now?

ACTIS: No. It may have had a show, but I don't remember the show. It did have a restaurant. I can't remember if there was a show or not, but I remember it had slot machines and tables.

ARENA: Was this done commonly by, say, people of your age, at that time, as well as, say, people right from Whittier? Did you notice any other--you need not mention names unless you wish to--but were there others of your acquaintances and friends who also attended? Was it a kind of regular thing?

ACTIS: No, not for people that I knew. Now, I think that a lot of people did go out there, and it was something that was a fun thing to do, but you didn't do it all the time. I mean, it was just an unusual experience.

ARENA: Do you mind saying whose idea it was?

ACTIS: Well, I think it was his. I'm sure it was, because--well, I was just delighted to get a chance to go, but I'm sure I hadn't thought about going. [Laughter]

ARENA: Had you ever been on a ship like that before in your life?

ACTIS: No. And, well, the thing that made it really fun was that, you know, in those days nobody had much money. Even by the time I graduated from Whittier College, it was still sort of hard times, you know. We were just coming out of it, and like in 1935, well, I can remember boys working all day long in a grocery store just to earn three dollars to go to a show and have a hamburger afterwards. So, to go somewhere like the gambling ship was really fun. We didn't have a lot of money to gamble with, and I know Dick didn't, either. But I remember he hit the jackpot on the quarter machine and I think he won something like fifteen or twenty dollars. I don't remember how much it was, but it was a lot of money for those days, and because of that, we stayed and had some dinner, where otherwise we were just going to go out and walk around, but we did sit down and eat because he won some money. But that was typical of the times. You had to limit what you did to the amount of money you had.

ARENA: Do you happen to recall whether your parents and his parents were aware of that evening's entertainment?

ACTIS: I don't know about his parents. I know I told my mother when I came back, and that wouldn't shock my mother, because, well, she was very, very strict with us, and we always got in when we were supposed to and everything, so that she trusted us, so it wouldn't shock her one bit because we were very responsible. But also, she liked Dick very much. She thought he was a very nice young man, so she wouldn't have been a bit shocked if she had known ahead of time. I don't know if she knew ahead of time we were going, even, but I know I told her when we came home.

ARENA: You did mention that the President's brother, Donald, may have been with him on the occasion of the Pierce party.

ACTIS: Yes, I'm sure he was there.

ARENA: Do you know if he might have been with you on the gambling ship?

ACTIS: No. No, I'm sure he wasn't. It seems like there was another couple, but I cannot remember. It was either we were by ourselves or there was a couple, but I can't remember who they were. I'm sorry about that, I really am. (I have since asked my mother if she remembers and she said there were two other couples. But I don't know who.)

ARENA: You were mentioning off the tape--maybe you might want to refer to that again--the President's conversation concerning his future hopes, or any of the things that you recall talking about that you wish to mention.

ACTIS: Yes. A great deal of our time together was spent talking. He was a very concerned young man, about the times and about people, and about things. In fact, I can remember it seemed to me that we just talked an awful lot, you know. And he really liked to do things like that more than anything else. And I remember one time when we were talking he said that some day when he had finished law school he was going to come back to Whittier, and he hoped to be a judge in Whittier, which. . . . I was so naive that I thought that was just really something great, you know, and I thought boy, that was really setting your aim pretty high, never, of course, dreaming that he would go much farther than that.

ARENA: Did he mention to you around this time--another thing you mentioned off the tape--about his election to that of head of the student government or student organization at law school?

ACTIS: No, I don't think he was student body president then, but he did become, after he went back to Duke [University], and I'm sure he wrote to me about it in a letter, but I can't quite tie it in with the dates that I have.

ARENA: Since you have brought up the question of your correspondence with him: one, what do you recall about the subjects brought up in the correspondence (that you wish to bring up, of course); and two, is any of this correspondence in existence now?

ACTIS: I wish it were. It's not in existence because I didn't give it any importance at all, and they were just nice, friendly letters about Duke. And I'm sure one of them said he was elected to student body office, but I could have been mistaken there. One was a birthday card, I remember that. My birthday's in September, and so it wasn't long after he got back to school. One had a caricature of him in it, that his roommate had drawn. It was really good. I did keep it for quite awhile, but then, you know, I threw it away with all of the rest of the stuff one time when I was cleaning things out.

ARENA: Do you recall that he would bring up subjects--if he did --such as homesickness, any interesting adventures while he was at Duke, in addition to the idea of being elected to the office of student government president?

ACTIS: No. I wish I could. I wish I did, but I just don't remember anything like that.

ARENA: If it isn't too personal, on the question of religion, do you recall ever meeting with his parents or other members of the family who were Quakers?

ACTIS: No, I didn't even meet his family, except his brother, Don, I met. But I never even met his family.

ARENA: Had you heard, or had you met, any Quakers--when I say heard, had you ever had any contact with any Quakers--before you met the President? I'm just wondering if, for example, that was a kind of an unusual thing, when you're wondering how would a Quaker act on a date--if any questions like that came up on a date, and then when you did meet him, what impressions you had of, not only the President, but the Quaker side of him, so to speak.

ACTIS: No. I didn't even think about his being a Quaker when I met him, because I had lived in Whittier long enough and the Quakers were just like everybody else, except for the very few that existed when I first went there who wore the long skirts and the bonnets. There were a few of those in Whittier in those days.

ARENA: I see.

ACTIS: But Dick wasn't like that at all, and I didn't even think about his being a Quaker. I really didn't. It wasn't any more obvious that he was a Quaker than it was that I was a Presbyterian.

ARENA: And that didn't come up, that you recall?

ACTIS: Not that I remember.

ARENA: . . . questions on religious differences, or anything like that?

ACTIS: Not that I remember, at all.

ARENA: Do you recall, while you were at Whittier College, that some of the teachers or administrators may have referred to Richard Nixon as a--in that case he would have been a recent graduate, of course--but as a graduate who had made good, one who was attending a law school in the East on a scholarship that he had won? Do you recall that coming up in college, and did that, more or less, make you even more impressed, in addition to his speaking about some day wanting to be a judge? I'm just wondering if that came up in any way.

ACTIS: No, not that I remember. I'm sure it must have, because I'm sure they were very proud of him, and I'm sure it must have, but I think I was probably too wrapped up in my own college life to pay enough attention to remember it. You know, you're pretty egotistical at that age. Your own affairs are so much more important, you know. But I'm sure it must have, because I know that they must have been very proud of him.

ARENA: If it isn't too personal, and without mentioning any names unless you wish to, were you dating other young men around that time, during the summer, both before and after?

ACTIS: Yes, I was. Yes, I was going out with two or three other young men besides Dick. It was just a very nice, pleasant summer. I mean, I can remember two or three others that I was dating. This is probably one reason why I'm a little foggy on dates and who went with us on a double date to the gambling ship. That's probably one reason why I can't remember for sure.

ARENA: Again, without mentioning any names unless you wish to, how would you compare his treatment of you, his overall personality, with other local young men whom you knew around the same time?

ACTIS: Well, I would say he was a complete gentleman, a perfect gentleman all the time. He really and truly was. He had lovely manners, and he was very, very nice, and concerned about what we were going to do, you know, something that would be fun and interesting to do. However, he didn't like to do things that were very active, you know, like the other young men I dated who liked to go down to the beach and go swimming, or go up to the mountains and do things, and dance, and Dick wasn't that kind. He preferred to go to a show, or go out and eat and sit and talk; that sort of thing, but very nice, and I really did enjoy his company. That's about the only difference I could say.

ARENA: As you know, he spent his honeymoon in Mexico, and of course, you had a direct link with Mexico, a strong one. Did the subject of Mexico come up in any way at that time, do you recall? I'm sure it did, the fact that you were brought up there, for so many years. But do you recall his having any particular interest in Mexico? Did that come up in any way?

ACTIS: I don't recall, I'm sorry. I really don't. I don't remember the things we talked about. I just remember that we talked an awful lot, more than you do with most young men when you're around nineteen or twenty. I mean, you're usually doing things more; where it seemed to me we had a lot of discussions, but I don't remember all the things that they were about. I think mostly it was about Dick and his philosophy, because he was really all wrapped up in his law, and stuff like that. And so really, as I remember, we talked about things like that, more than anything.

ARENA: Speaking about what would have been a very typical, maybe, a quiet peaceful date with him, and tying in your mutual interest, do you recall visiting something like the Pio Pico mansion, which was the residence of the last Mexican governor of California, Governor Pio Pico?

ACTIS: I don't know if he and I went there. I've been there, but I don't remember if the two of us went there together. But I was there when they had a celebration one time. I went out there to--oh, I wore a Mexican outfit that I brought from Mexico. They had some sort of a celebration, and I can remember reading a letter in Spanish that someone brought there that was written in the 1800's, and they couldn't translate it, and I translated it for them. But Dick and I didn't go out there that I can remember.

ARENA: Now we were discussing off the tape, and I'd like to make a record of it, the experience where you were interviewed by a reporter (whom we will not mention)

for a newspaper (which we will not mention) concerning your having known the President. I wonder if you would mind giving a follow-up story connected with it?

ACTIS: Yes. I taught school last year with a marvelous, fun-loving staff, and so I was interviewed recently by a reporter, on the telephone, from Washington who told me that they were doing a piece about the President for his birthday, and they wanted to know about some of his background and his history, and they wanted to know what I could tell them about him. Well, I didn't say very much, but it came out in a newspaper. Shall I tell what it came out under?

ARENA: Please do, yes.

ACTIS: It came out in a newspaper under the heading of "The Rating of the Sex Appeal of the Candidates for President."

ARENA: Whereas, you were expecting that the article would deal with what?

ACTIS: Something about his birthday. It came out prior to his birthday, and she made it clear that I thought that it was going to be something about his birthday and people who had known him in his past. So, when it came out under this rating of the sex appeal of the candidates, well, the teachers in this other school found it in a newspaper. I didn't know it was in there until they found it, and consequently, in order to tease me, they made up a book entitled, "Everything You Always Wanted to Know about Dick and Marie and Were Afraid to Ask." And of course, it was just to tease me, because they were surprised to find out that I knew Mr. Nixon. [Laughter] And so they put in some really good pictures with funny comments underneath. And I really do treasure the book, because I know the staff and how much fun they are. But it isn't presumptuous in any way, because I had never really, you know, bragged a great deal about knowing him. I just was proud of it, and so when it got in the newspaper under this heading, I was a little disturbed, and of course, they really did tease me about that.

ARENA: Mrs. Actis, as this interview is coming to a close, is there anything that you would like to bring up, any topic that I have not brought up myself in the way of a question, anything at all that you would like to say?

ACTIS: Well, I've enjoyed doing this interview. I've enjoyed it very much.

ARENA: Is there anything you would like to say in addition to what's already been brought up?

ACTIS: I can't think of anything special, except that having known Dick is one of my fond memories. I mean, I'm very pleased to have known him, and, well, it's a very fond memory. He was a very nice young man, very quiet, and a gentleman, like I said, so that I'm proud of the fact that I knew him, I really am.

ARENA: That does remind me of something, by the way, that I might have raised earlier. Maybe you wouldn't mind answering it. Did you go dancing together, and what are your recollections of him as a dancer? Or would this be in the active category, and you didn't do active things like that?

ACTIS: No, it seems like we did go dancing; I couldn't say for sure. But I don't think we did it very often, and I really can't remember any specific time that we did dance, except that I have a faint recollection that we did, but when or where, I don't know. I think we were just probably, like if we were somewhere where there happened to be dancing, we danced. But it's been so many, many years, and my memory is not what it should be, I guess.

ARENA: I think you've done remarkably well, and I personally want to thank you for extending to me the hospitality of your home, and granting this interview, which future historians will appreciate as much as I do now. Thank you very much, Mrs. Actis.

ACTIS: You're welcome.