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Julie Nixon Eisenhower (January 24, 1973)

C. Richard Arena

Oral History Interview

with

MRS. JULIE NIXON EISENHOWER

January 24, 1973

The White House
Washington, D. C.

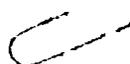
By Dr. C. Richard Arena

For the Richard Nixon Oral History Project

ARENA: This is interview #1 with Mrs. Julie Nixon Eisenhower, in The White House on January 24, 1973.

Mrs. Eisenhower, may I begin by asking you about, not your parents, but the parents of President Nixon, your father? Just what do you recall--and I realize you did not know them very long--but just what do you recall about both of them, about each one of them, including if you wish, stories that your father passed on to you about them, and whatever comes to mind? Take as much time as you like.

EISENHOWER: Well, I remember quite a bit, because when my father was Vice President my mother and he went on tours of what were known as the good will trips around the world, and Nana [Hannah Milhous Nixon] and Grampa [Francis Anthony Nixon] would always come back to stay with Tricia [Nixon] and me. This helped Tricia and me immeasurably because we were so young. I was between the ages of four and twelve when my father was Vice President, and we couldn't understand why my parents had to be away for long periods of time, and having Nana and Grampa there really made it very special. I remember that the last time they stayed with us--I think my parents were on their trip to Africa--my grandfather was not very well, but Nana somehow took care of Tricia and me and of Grampa. I remember Nana much better, because I was only seven when my grandfather died.



What I do remember about my grandfather was that he had a great sense of humor and he was a wonderful storyteller. And I also remember very vividly that he had a real temper. And I don't know if I remember that so much because he was ill so much of the time that he spent with us, and I think that makes you more irritable. But he did have a great temper. And to see my grandparents together, even though I was young, I remember the contrast, because Nana was so gentle and quiet and Grampa was so volatile and with this great temper, that they really complemented each other, but they were a real contrast.

I know that my grandmother had a great influence, not only on my father's life, but on the lives of Tricia and me. I've just never known anyone like her. I know that our family friend, Helene Drown, has said that if there are any saints who have lived on earth, Nana had to be one of them. And I really think that that's not an exaggeration, because she was a human being and yet she had superhuman qualities of compassion and understanding and sensitivity, and she was just completely self-effacing. And yet she wasn't one of these Uriah Heep phony-humble people; in other words, she lived fully, and she was so involved with her family. She loved her family. I think that she knew every fifth, sixth, seventh cousin, and they were always welcome in her home, and I know my father has told me so many times of the Sunday meetings with all the Milhouses, and the many times they would gather at Grandmother Milhouse's for the big family reunions. It was very important in Nana's life, and she really cared about people.

I know that she was always doing wonderful little things for Tricia and me. For example, in 1960 when my parents were starting the presidential campaign, Tricia and I were sent to camp. And we thought we wanted to go, but once I got there I decided I really didn't like it and I was very homesick, and the camp was out in California. Nana would write to us, like every second day, and we would write her little letters. She must have known that I was very homesick, and I think she started on a project to kind of cheer me up and give me something to look forward to. She was very saving with money because she had to work so hard in her lifetime, but for my birthday, my twelfth birthday, she decided she was going to get me a ring. My birthstone was a ruby, so we had this great correspondence about the ring. She sent me a string and I tied the string around my ring finger and then I mailed it back to her. And then on my birthday she came up to the camp and she brought the ring with her, and it fit perfectly. Just little thoughtful things like that.

Another thing I remember about Nana's visits: When we lived over on Forest Lane--I think we moved over there in 1957, to a larger house--Nana's room was on the third floor. She had a big poster bed. It was an old-fashioned room that my mother had set up just for her and for her visits. And every time that Nana

visited, Tricia and I would have arguments about who got to sleep with Nana that night. And so we'd have to take turns, because all three couldn't sleep in the big four-poster bed. She was that kind of person. She was so warm that you wanted to be close to her.

I know that in the last years that I knew her, even though she wasn't as well as she had been before, she was slowing down and it was harder for her to get around, she was still. . . . You just never heard her complain. I guess that's the only way to say it. She had an extremely positive outlook on life. And I think that is reflected, that is seen in my father, too, because if anyone in our family is the optimist, it's he. I think that one of the things that I'll never forget about my father is his favorite phrase. I think I hear him repeat it more often than any other, and that is, "It's no problem." And it's always funny, because whenever we will have had some kind of a family discussion over some silly, minor thing, Tricia and I will look at each other, or David [Dwight David Eisenhower III] and I will look at each other, and we'll know that in a minute Dad, to end the conversation, will say, "Oh, there's no problem. It's going to be fine. Everything has worked out well."

I think that what my father inherited from his father is a real sense of a fighting spirit, and a sort of never-give-up attitude. And I know that one of the stories that my father tells a lot about his father is how Grampa just loved to be involved in everything. For example, when my father was elected to Congress in '46, from that day forward every single week my father would send from his congressional office, and later senatorial and then vice-presidential office, the Congressional Quarterly, and my grandfather would read that boring manuscript from front to back. You know, he just was so involved and so interested, and he wanted to know just what was going on. That's one of the things that my father has told us quite a bit about those years.

If you would like to know some of the stories my father has told me about the years when Harold [Samuel Nixon] had tuberculosis, I could tell you that.

ARENA: I would appreciate that very much.

EISENHOWER: The reason I mention it is that it is something that I have heard my father talk about quite a bit, so it must have made a deep impression on him; I mean, it must have been just an incredibly hard time in the family. And the reason that he has told Tricia and me these stories, I think, is to show how much he admired his parents at this time. Even though he was a teen-ager, he knew how hard it was for them. When my Uncle Harold, whom I never knew, contracted tuberculosis he kept getting worse and worse, and finally the doctors decided that if he moved to Arizona he might have a chance to live. And so Nana went to

Prescott, Arizona, and what she did to earn money was to take other young men who had tuberculosis and to care for them. And so this left my father and his father, [Francis Anthony] Frank Nixon, and Uncle Don [Francis Donald Nixon] and Uncle Eddie [Edward Calvert Nixon] back in California alone and having to take care of the store and run everything on their own. And my father has said how they would live out of cans, really, the chili and beans, and how with Nana gone they really wouldn't do the cooking, but how my grandfather kind of held everything together. And then every weekend they would make the drive, that long drive across the desert to see Harold and Nana, just to keep the family together. They went every single weekend, and they wouldn't get there, I guess, until very, very late, well, early Saturday morning; in other words, the middle of the night Saturday, and they'd only have one full day together. So many times I've heard my father tell how Nana would care for these boys, and it must have been a terrible thing to go through, because when you see somebody you love, your son, getting worse and worse and weaker and weaker, and then also to care for other young people who you know may never recover, it must have been a very difficult thing. But the reason he's told us those stories is to show how important it was to keep the family together and how much he admired his parents; and really, it must have been the most difficult time in their lives, probably harder than when Arthur [Burdg Nixon] died, because that was a sudden death and they didn't have to go through the long, long period.

My mother has told me that Nana always carried Harold's letters in her pocketbook; you know, she never really got over his death. And when Tricia was born, Nana and Grampa went to the hospital to see Mother, and somehow Nana left her purse in the car and it was stolen, and that was the time when the purse was stolen and she lost the letters. And Mother remembers that.

Another thing I remember is when I was born. You know, you always hear stories about when you were born. I was born on July 5th. On the 4th of July my grandparents drove down from their farm in Pennsylvania to see my parents and Tricia, and I remember hearing the story of how they had the big block of ice in the car to keep cool, because I think it was one of the hottest days on record in Washington, the 4th and 5th of July in 1948. And they brought down with them a big cake that they had baked, and I remember hearing that story.

You know how religious my grandmother was, and I don't know about my grandfather because, as I say, I was only seven when he died, but it was the kind of religion that was very quiet, and completely an inner sort of religion, so much so that I've never heard my grandmother, and my parents have never told me that she was in any way disappointed that when we moved to Washington we didn't attend the Society of Friends Church. What my parents did was to take us to the community church. When we lived in Spring Valley [District of Columbia] we went to the church that

was four blocks away, the Congregational church. Then when we lived over in Wesley Heights [District of Columbia] we went to the Methodist church, because my parents believed in the community church nearby, where you would go to Sunday school with your friends, and this kind of thing.

But one thing that I know that I've inherited from my grandmother and that I know is very true of my father is the idea of silent prayer. And I know that I find that any church service isn't complete unless there's some moment in the service where you can just sit quietly and think. In other words, you have to have moments when you can think your thoughts through. But that's the legacy that my grandmother left me and I've found it to really help me in my personal life.

ARENA: Do you mind if I ask you concerning the religious aspect of your father and your grandmother? The President himself has mentioned in his book, Six Crises, that his mother had hopes when he was a youngster that he would some day grow up and be a missionary in Central America. I just wonder if that has ever come up either from your father or from your grandmother since?

EISENHOWER: No, I never heard that, but I do remember my father The only time, as I say. . . . One thing about my grandmother, which I guess was very good, was that she never tried to impose her views. And the only time I've ever heard anything about Nana's religious beliefs, really, as far as my father's decisions, the decisions he made in his lifetime, was when my father decided to ask for active duty in World War II. He asked to be sent overseas to serve. And he said that Nana never questioned that. In other words, he knew that she was such a devout Quaker that this must have been a hard thing for her to accept, but she never questioned it.

A story that he just told the other night at dinner about his grandmother, Nana's mother, I think is very important, because I've heard so many stories about this woman, she must have had a great influence on his life. But he told us the other night at dinner how she, every day of her life, until I think a few weeks before she died--she died in her nineties--she went on Sunday afternoon to visit the Veterans' Hospital. And this was something that she did, and I think it's so interesting that she, as a very devout Quaker, would do this, and it must have been her way of well, first of all, participating in the community, and then the whole idea of service, and the fact that she didn't believe in on-combat, and yet there are other ways to serve. And I know that this really meant a lot to my father. He admired her so much, for every Sunday, you know, it was a ritual. She never let sickness or maybe that desire: Well, maybe this Sunday I'll stay home and relax. It was just something that she did, and what she would do is, she would visit with the patients and she would write letters for them, read to them and talk to them and this kind of thing.

ARENA: Excuse me. This would be Grandmother Almira Milhous.

EISENHOWER: Yes, and many times my grandmother [Hannah Nixon] would go with her. And you know that my father had hanging in his room as a child the [Henry Wadsworth] Longfellow quotation that Grandmother Milhous gave him?

ARENA: Would you please repeat that for the record? I have heard something along those lines.

EISENHOWER: "Lives of great men oft remind us
We can make our lives sublime,
And, departing, leave behind us
Footprints in the sands of time."

I know that when I was in the sixth grade I had this project on South America, and we had to make a scrapbook. We had to make a title page, an art page for each nation, each South American nation. And we also had to do it on scenes; you know, we had to paint and draw. And when we got to the section on heroes I was stuck; you know, explorers and heroes, that chapter in South American history? I didn't know what to do. And it was my father who came up with the suggestion: "Well, Julie, why don't you use the quotation that I had framed and hanging in my bedroom all the years I was growing up, and then trace some little footprints and use the brown paper?" And I think that was the best front page I ever made, that beautiful quotation from Longfellow, and then the little footprints in the sands of time on the cover. So that was something that my father remembered from his childhood.

ARENA: Excuse me. Do you recall your father, the President, bringing up his interest in President [Abraham] Lincoln as something that he inherited or obtained through his grandmother, again, Grandmother Almira?

EISENHOWER: Yes, that is true. My father has told me that his Grandmother Milhous gave him a picture, a photograph of President Lincoln, and that this also hung in his bedroom. Apparently, this was one of her heroes, and of course it went on down to my father.

ARENA: Your father's grandmother was also interested in writing poetry and in writing in general. I wonder if he ever referred to that, the fact that she did enjoy writing verses?

EISENHOWER: Yes, he has talked about that, and one of the things I treasure is a little book that the family put out, I don't know how many years ago, it must have been at least fifteen years ago, of all her poetry.

And I know that one thing that makes me think that my father has always valued the written word and at least knew how much that meant to his grandmother, was that sometimes that when he got older, in his teen years, instead of a birthday present--because you don't know what to give someone like that--what he would do is write a long, beautiful letter, knowing that that would mean much more to his grandmother than a little gift. And it was something that he encouraged Tricia and me to do. For example, whenever we had. . . . Well, all the years that we grew up when we were old enough to write, we would write Thanksgiving menus; for example, for Thanksgiving dinner. We would make poems on each place card, for Nana and for any other family members who came to our Thanksgiving dinner. We did so many things, like plays. For example, when my parents came back from their trip to the Soviet Union in 1959, and when they came back from their trip to South America--I can't remember when it was. . . .

ARENA: During his vice-presidential years.

EISENHOWER: During the vice-presidential years, when we were growing up, the thing that we knew would please them would be something creative, something written, and we would write our own play. In '59 we wrote our own version of "Cinderella" and then performed it for them, and that kind of thing. The poetry and the little stories were very important in our growing up.

ARENA: May I ask you, while we're on the question of his Quaker ancestry, have you been in the presence of the President with any of his relatives where he was called upon or they used the expressions which are common among Quakers, of course, the "thee" and the "thou"? I wonder if you've ever been exposed to that?

EISENHOWER: I have. Whenever my grandmother was with her sisters, like Aunt Jane [Milhous Beeson], whom I knew well, and Aunt Edith [Milhous Timberlake] and Aunt Olive [Rose Olive Milhous Marshburn], Nana and her sisters always used "thee" and "thou." And I've never heard my father use it.

ARENA: Could I also ask you, on the subject of the background and the President's assistance to you in that historical project--or it may have been geography, regarding Latin America--did he ever bring up the origins of his interest in history as stemming from any particular source? As you know, he majored in history at Whittier College.

EISENHOWER: Right.

ARENA: Did he ever go into, possibly, how he first became interested in history enough to want to major in it in college?

EISENHOWER: The only thing I can think of is, as I say, my grandfather was really very combative. You wouldn't use the word combative, but he had a lot of spirit. He really did, and he was very interested in the world around him, everything that was going on. And I know that my father has said that they always had newspapers around the house, and that my father read the newspapers, and I think he got interested in politics and government that way. My father has never told me this story, but it is something that I remember reading and I know that it's true. It was during the Teapot Dome scandal. Nana has told me this story, that Daddy read avidly all about this, and at that time he vowed that he would become a lawyer, and a good lawyer, someone who couldn't be bought, when he grew up, and Nana has told me that story.

ARENA: May I ask you, have you formalized your interest in history? Did you major in history yourself, and would you attribute that in any way to your father's influence?

EISENHOWER: I think so. Both Tricia and I majored in history in college. And I think that it's the logical thing to major in when you live in a house where you're interested in world affairs and government and politics, that kind of thing. So yes, I would say that it was my father's influence. But he's very much like Nana, in the sense that he never suggested or gave guidance as far as what he thought about where he thought we should go to school or what he thought we should major in. It just came naturally for us.

ARENA: I wonder if you had the opportunity when you did visit Whittier [California] from time to time, to ever visit the home in which your grandmother grew up, the home that was built by her father? This would be Franklin Milhous. I just wonder if you have any personal recollections of that home.

EISENHOWER: You know, I don't think I do. But I know that many times when we'd go to California, Nana would drive us--well, not many times, but a couple of times--out to Yorba Linda to see that house. But I don't remember her taking us to see the house that she grew up in.

ARENA: The home in Yorba Linda, I know you know, is the one in which the President was born. Do you recall the President ever bringing up, or anyone, the fact that your grandfather was very handy with tools, that he built that home, actually? And what references come to mind along those lines.

EISENHOWER: I don't remember him ever talking, really, about him using his hands. Really, the remembrances that I have of those years don't really start until the store. I just heard so many stories about how they worked together in the store and made it run. And of course, my mother remembers vividly, when she first knew my father, how she just couldn't believe Nana, what he could accomplish, because you see, my grandmother baked all the pies that they sold in the store, and she would get up at 5:00 in the morning and bake the pies. And many times my mother, who taught school, would get up at 4:30 and be over at the house by 5:00 to help Nana bake these pies. And my mother has told me that she doesn't know how Nana did it, because it wasn't a kitchen made for processing many pies; it was just a regular old family kitchen. And to be able to do all that in a kitchen where she didn't really have the equipment and space--she was just a remarkable person. And my mother remembers going over and helping her bake the pies, and that kind of thing.

ARENA: If this isn't too personal: You may recall your father, our President, talking about the manner of upbringing on the part of his parents, whether they were strict or not strict, the discipline that was maintained in the family. I would like to ask you, again, if it's not too personal, to what extent would you compare your own upbringing, especially where your father is concerned, and on this question of strictness of discipline, with what you understand was the discipline that was accorded him as a youngster on the part of your grandparents?

EISENHOWER: Well, I think that I am right in saying that my grandfather used to raise his voice with the boys. Obviously, if you have five sons they are not going to always get along beautifully, and if they fought he would raise his voice and this kind of thing. And apparently, sometimes he would have arguments with Don, and my grandmother or father would have to be the peacemaker. And so one thing that has really stood out in my mind all through my childhood is that I've never heard my father raise his voice. He just doesn't do it. He has never physically punished us. I have to admit, though, that he hasn't been the major disciplinarian. In other words, if any punishment has been done it has had to come through my mother. And the way that she's done it--she has never raised her voice or spanked either--it was just, for example, when we were smaller, to take away a television program, or to go to your room to be quiet for a while, this kind of thing. But all through my childhood. . . .

My father doesn't like arguments; he likes discussions but he doesn't like arguments and fighting, this kind of thing. He's always made us try to reason things out and to discuss things, and I think it's been really good, because he feels that the home should be a place where you help each other and where

there's real comfort. And I know an example of that philosophy is that he thinks that dinner should always be a very pleasant time. In other words, he looked forward to coming home to the family dinner. It was the one part of the day when he could really see us when we were growing up, because he would be working all day and at the time he went to work we were getting ready for school in the morning, so we didn't really see him that much. And he always wanted dinner to be very special. So when he'd get home from work he'd come in, and the first thing he would do--no matter where we lived we've always had a record player, and then later on we had stereo equipment--he'd turn on the music, just because he wanted us to be very happy. We'd always have music with dinner, either coming from the den loud enough to reach the dining room, and then later we had it piped into the dining room. Dinner was a very special occasion, and he always wanted it to be that way.

I think that Nana, when she stayed with us and baby-sat when my parents went away on trips, was also like my father and my mother, both my parents, in that she somehow was able to discipline without harshness, or I guess it was the kind of thing where you wanted to live up to what she expected of you. I think that was their secret. Both my parents expected certain things of Tricia and me, and Nana expected certain things. And so we wanted to live up to it.

ARENA: If this isn't too personal, bearing in mind the Quaker tradition of service to the community, [BEGIN SIDE II TAPE I] bearing in mind the fact that your father did some teaching in Sunday school classes--this was before he left Whittier--bearing in mind also your mother was a teacher, would you say that you can trace your own interest in teaching, not only to your mother, but to your father's experience and to the Quaker tradition which, of course, is very deep in his own roots?

EISENHOWER: I think that I never really heard my father talk about teaching, but rather what he emphasized was service to the country. In other words, what are you doing for others; what are you doing for your country? And I know that when I was growing up, one thing that I'll always remember about my father and that's so vivid in my mind is that when he got home from work--this went on for several years, for as long as I can remember when I would be what is called a child, up to a teen-ager--my father would get home and we had kind of a running thing going. He would always ask me the same question when he came in the door. He'd say, "Well, Julie, what did you do for your country today?" When I was younger the question would bother me, sort of, because I took it completely seriously, and I thought, well, gee, I just went to school and I didn't do anything for my country, and I'd be very worried about it. But I always had a stock answer that I gave him. I'd say, "Well, Daddy, I cheered you up and so I helped my country today." And

that's the way I'd always answer him. But, even though he asked this question not really seriously, underneath he was serious. He did want us to feel. . . .

The most important think my father leaves to me, I think, is the sense that you've got to reach outside yourself. People don't grow and they don't live life to the fullest unless they are involved in something bigger than themselves. And it's a cliché but it's true. It's what my father has always talked about, and he just believes it so strongly. To be great, or to be a person who can really help others and who can make a difference in the world, and in your community and in your family, you have to reach out beyond yourself. Whether you just help your family, or if you help your community or whatever, you have to not be self-centered. And I think what I like best about his Inaugural Address was when he said that we have to live our ideals. My father is really very idealistic, and he expects great things of people, and I think that's important.

And if I have to characterize him--you had asked me earlier about that and I just wrote down a couple of phrases--the words that I would use to describe him are that he's very sensitive to the needs of other people. If I can explain it a little more, he's very much aware of moods and of how people feel, and I see this constantly within the family. He can tell if somebody has been hurt by what somebody else has said. And he can tell if someone needs a lift. That's one thing that I love about him, he's so thoughtful about the phone calls that he makes and the way he tries to cheer people up; the little notes he slips under my door or slips under Tricia's door, that kind of thing.

Another word that I would use to describe him is that he's very kind. And when I think of Nana and when I think of him, I think that's the real bond there. They're both just, well, very kind people.

And the third word I'd use to describe him is upbeat. He's very optimistic; he's very upbeat. As I say, getting back to that old phrase he uses, "No problem." He's very much the optimist; he always has been, even in difficult times. In 1962 when he was defeated, I remember the day. He was depressed, and the way he showed being depressed was that he was really unable to console us, and that's one of the few times that I've lived with him when he hasn't been the one who was cheering everyone else up and consoling everyone else. But the day after the defeat, it was back to helping us, by planning the trip to Europe, by planning a vacation, this kind of thing. He seems to be able to bounce back.

ARENA: Mrs. Eisenhower, as this interview comes to a close now, I want to be sure that there is no subject that I have not touched upon that you would like to bring up yourself at this point. Is there any question or any subject that has not come up in the interview that you would like to be sure to include at this time?

EISENHOWER: I can't think of anything right now.

ARENA: Then I want to thank you very much for allowing me the privilege of this interview, and my fellow historians will be equally grateful, I assure you. Thank you very much. It's been a pleasure.

EISENHOWER: Thank you. You know, one thing that I feel I should say in the interview: I don't think that my interview is as balanced as it could be as far as my grandparents go, because I knew my grandmother until I was eighteen years old, and of course, my grandfather died when I was only going on eight years old. But I think that so many of the books that have been written emphasize how important Nana was in my father's life, and I have referred to her so much, that it gives the impression that my grandfather wasn't important. But I know from the things that my father has said that Grampa, I think you could say, was equally important in his life, and I wouldn't want to give the other impression.

ARENA: Excuse me. Including, by the way, what he himself has written in Six Crises. He refers to the fact that his father, although not formally educated beyond the sixth grade, wanted to be sure that the children receive the best in the way of an education.

EISENHOWER: That's really true, and just the whole--giving them a spirit and a drive, I think. And I know my father has used the phrase, "Well, he was a hell of a guy." You know, it's something that's so close to his heart that it's hard to verbalize. He has said so many times, that he didn't have the education, he didn't have all the chances, but what courage he had, and really kind of a stick-to-itiveness!

ARENA: Bearing in mind what you did say about the gentleness of your grandmother, about the determination and spirit of your grandfather, how apropos would the expression "opposites attract" be in this case?

EISENHOWER: For my grandparents?

ARENA: Your grandparents.

EISENHOWER: Yes, if you can peg people like that, which I think sometimes you can, I think they would be complete opposites, and that's the attraction there. And I think that sometimes it's not wise to try to decide what characteristics a child has gained from each parent, but if I can try to say it, I would say that I think that my father at home, the way he wants a happy home and no arguing, and the way that's so important to him in his life, kind of needing support in his home, I think that would come from Nana. And yet, the fact that

he is a fighter and has been throughout his life, he doesn't give up, and that when things get tough he keeps going and he does the thing that he thinks is right, as I think in the recent decision now in Vietnam, and how we do have a peace settlement because he knew that the bombing was the only way to make sure that we had a peace settlement, that much of that fortitude comes, not only from Nana's quiet assurance, but also from my grandfather, who had a lot of courage and of spirit.

ARENA: I'm very grateful for these afterthoughts. Thank you very much, Mrs. Eisenhower.