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Edward Nixon (February 10, 1971, first interview)

C. Richard Arena

Oral History Interview

with

MR. EDWARD C. NIXON

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En route to Yorba Linda, California

By Dr. C. Richard Arena

For the Richard Nixon Oral History Project

NIXON: We are on Beach Boulevard, a half block from Whittier Boulevard and you see here, what is called now, Scandia Gardens Smorgasbord; the old structure there, that house, was my parents' home back during the fifties, around the time of the Korean War and all through perhaps 1957. We will have to check on the dates specifically later on. My father died in the upstairs room on the right side there in September 1956. And my brother was Vice President, of course, all the time that they lived in this house, and they visited the folks here several times during that period. At the time it was the only house within sight. This was all orange groves, lemon groves--completely surrounded.

ARENA: Obviously your father was retired at that time.

NIXON: Yes, he was retired. In fact, he was pretty well an invalid, because of a broken arm that had not healed properly back on the Pennsylvania farm. And his health had been failing all along, very slowly.

ARENA: How about his eyesight? Could he continue to read? Could he hear well?

NIXON: Oh, yes, he listened to his radio programs and watched television. I don't think he read too much though, because his eyes were probably a little dimmer than they should have been. But he was alert up to the last minute.

ARENA: What was his age, again, when he died?

NIXON: Born in 1878 and died in 1956, so he was 77, going on 78.

ARENA: And your mother continued to live here after he died, for a while?

NIXON: For a short time, yes. And then she moved down Whittier Boulevard to a house which still exists down there, right across the street from East Whittier Friends Church. She lived there up until the time that she herself became incapacitated and had to move into a rest home, Whittmar Nursing Complex [now known as Beverly Manor Convalescent Hospital East]. So, there's the picture of the La Habra residence. This is the only house in La Habra that they ever lived in.

ARENA: And it's the same city where your brother practiced law for a while.

NIXON: That is correct. But he came to California following Duke University. He joined the firm of Wingert and Bewley in Whittier and they established a branch office in La Habra which was part-time, open certain hours during the week.

ARENA: Did he specialize in any legal cases or was he a general. . . .

NIXON: No, I think he had just general practice. Just took cases as they arose. I am sure that every profession has preferences. I don't know what his were. Now, this is Whittier Boulevard. This is new to me. They may have changed the name. I think this used to be Central [Avenue].

ARENA: You do recall when you were living together--you and President Nixon and brother Don [Francis Donald Nixon] --at what was the Nixon market?

NIXON: And the gasoline station.

ARENA: What was the precise address of the home?

NIXON: It was 2706 East Whittier Boulevard. Of course, at that time the blocks were numbered from the city of Whittier, the post office being the central location. Today there is county-wide numbering, so it is 15806 East Whittier Boulevard. That location at the corner of Santa Gertrudes Avenue and Whittier Boulevard is where I came into the world, although I was born in Murphy Memorial Hospital in Whittier.

ARENA: Which is now a part of the Whittier College campus, if I'm not mistaken.

NIXON: That may be. I don't know. It has changed quite a bit up here. The old hospital is closed, but the grounds and building probably are the college--it's close, nearby. Anyway, at that time, 1930, three of my brothers were living and there were five of us altogether who were born to my parents. The three were: the oldest Harold [Samuel Nixon], then my brothers Richard and Don. Arthur [Burdg Nixon] had died in 1925.

ARENA: How old was Arthur at the time?

NIXON: Arthur was seven when he died.

ARENA: Excuse me. Evidently President Nixon was very fond of him. I understand there is a beautiful letter he composed regarding him later on.

NIXON: Well, there was a sensitivity among us anyway. It was there. The thing my brother Dick was able to do was to describe it. He wrote even as a student. Let's see, he would have been only twelve years old at the time of his death. Prior to that he had written something about Arthur and after he died he wrote another very nice piece.

ARENA: His Grandmother Almira [Burdg Milhous] was very interested in writing and wrote poems.

NIXON: Yes.

ARENA: She must have had an influence along those lines on all of you and also on Dick.

NIXON: Oh, yes, there was a literary heritage that came from her, I suspect, and to my brother. The rest of us were not so inclined to write.

ARENA: And among the other members of her family, her children, I understand it is Mrs. [Rose] Olive Marshburn who continued that tradition more than the others. Would that be correct? Or was it also Aunt Edith Timberlake who continued doing this?

NIXON: Do you mean composition?

ARENA: Poetry, creative composition.

NIXON: Well, I'm not sure how that might be. I think Aunt Olive would be the best representative of that, although the sisters never were nearly as creative as my grandmother, my mother's contemporaries.

ARENA: Are those writings now in the hand of a particular relative or just scattered about?

NIXON: Oh, no. Olive Marshburn has them collected and she has, in fact, some of my grandmother's writings which were published in a small booklet some years ago.

ARENA: You don't recall the title by any chance?

NIXON: No, I don't, but it would be readily available from the Marshburn family or from any of the. . . . I have a copy and my brother has a copy. All of us have that publication, so I'm sure we can dig one up for you.

ARENA: And there is also, of course, your cousin Jessamyn West, who carries on that tradition.

NIXON: That's true.

ARENA: The way she earns a living.

NIXON: Jessamyn West is really the foremost literary artist in the family, bar none. Even going back in time you don't find anyone as remarkably capable as she. Her relationship is as a cousin--my mother [Hannah Milhous Nixon] and her mother [Grace Anna Milhous West] were first cousins.

ARENA: Did she grow up in Whittier also--possibly attend the same schools that you and your brothers had?

NIXON: Yes. I am not sure what elementary and high school education, or what schools she attended, but she did live right near the East Whittier Friends Church, which was where my father had her in Sunday school, and her father had my brother in his Sunday school class. So there was quite a mixing of ideas. In fact, there is quite a little interesting story about that. I can't remember how it goes.

ARENA: Some aspects of that, I believe, emphasize that your father tended to bring in contemporary events or he would, as you say, make religion very relevant to conditions going on at the time. I believe she does refer to that aspect of his teaching. And that made his classes very interesting. As a matter of fact, not only your father, but I understand your mother also did teach.

NIXON: Oh, yes, they all had--everyone had duties to carry out.

ARENA: If I'm not mistaken, your father was not a birthright Quaker. And from your understanding, what is the difference between birthright Quaker and what would be the name for his particular. . . .

NIXON: Well, he was a Methodist.

ARENA: Originally, right. So what would that make him--what actually. . . . If you had a birthright as a Quaker, what would be the definition of someone who has not a birthright?

NIXON: Well, there is a category called a confession of faith which would have applied to him, I suppose. I don't know that much about his own record. I suppose my aunts and uncles would have to tell you that.

ARENA: Yes. I will follow up on that. I do believe that possibly there was a biography that did say he became a Quaker after he married, or close around that time. I don't believe he was a Quaker before, but we should check up on that.

NIXON: I'm not sure he ever was one.

ARENA: I see. But these Sunday school classes were held in a Quaker church?

NIXON: Oh, yes, in the meeting house.

ARENA: I see. Jessamyn West refers to a character, her heroine as a matter of fact in her book, Except for Thee and Me, is a Quaker minister, which I understand is not too common, and I presume that that could be modeled on Great-grandmother Milhous, the mother of Grandmother Almira [Milhous], who I understand was a minister.

NIXON: Yes, Elizabeth [Price Griffith] Milhous would have been the name.

ARENA: Did she come to California also, by any chance, or was it just Grandmother Almira?

NIXON: I don't know. I think not. They lived in Butlerville, Indiana. There were quite a number of Quakers in that area--still are.

ARENA: Do you recall as you grew up there was a conscious interest on the part of your father or mother or relatives in genealogy?

NIXON: No, not to the extent of researching it. There was an interest to the extent of knowing and having the knowledge of the genealogy, but only by what was told. In other words, it was rather a word-of-mouth knowledge of the background. The only thing I ever heard of, for example, were stories that my mother told, which were obviously things that she had been told.

ARENA: Do you recall your mother or again any other relatives--uncles or aunts--referring to John Nixon, who has been described as the Sheriff of Philadelphia, who read the Declaration of Independence on the 8th of July in Independence Square? Do you recall having that information?

NIXON: No.

ARENA: Since President Nixon majored in history, it seems that that would have been of particular interest to him. You don't know, for example, that he knew that?

NIXON: I never heard it discussed. Not that particular point.

ARENA: Well, actually, as I recall, there were very few Nixons living in California at the time you were growing up. This might explain why there was so little reference to the Nixons who participated in the revolution or participated in the reading of the Declaration of Independence, and the Nixon [George Nixon III] who died at Gettysburg [Pennsylvania]. Is that correct?

NIXON: I think that's true. The Nixons moved to California at a time--mostly at my dad's invitation. Not until my Uncle Walter [Wadsworth Nixon], my father's oldest brother, arrived in California and they began to recollect old times and relatives and so on, did I really hear anything about the Nixons.

ARENA: To what extent do you know of the existence of Nixons now in California? Walter came alone--was not married at the time?

NIXON: No, he was married and had children. Let's see--and my father's sister, Irene [Chloe Nixon Engle] was also, but she died before I was born. But her children came to California. My father's younger sister, Carrie [May Nixon Wildermuth Skinner] lived in Fullerton and she was another influence on recollecting family. So let's see, we have Walter, Carrie and my dad, and the children of my Aunt Irene, who all came to California after my dad came.

ARENA: Do you recall your Milhous relatives referring to such things as the underground railroad, which Jessamyn West refers to again in her novel, Except for Thee and Me, and other activities of the Quakers during the Civil War period, including, of course, one of your brother's great idols, President Abraham Lincoln himself. It is my understanding your Grandmother Almira admired him, too, most deeply.

NIXON: I think that Jessamyn West dug that out pretty well on her own. There was never any reference to an underground railroad, per se. There were references to colored people, as they were called then, but we never made

much note of the fact that there was any difference. They were people who worked for my grandfather on the Indiana farm. I seem to recall the name Mag. [End of interview]